

Generation Z and the challenges of their university education



How independent are the young people who are going to college today? What makes them **different from previous generations?** What can **teachers** do to **motivate them to learn?**

These were some of the observations that **Jean Twenge**, a professor and psychologist at San Diego State University, shared with [Tec de Monterrey](#) teachers during her keynote speech **“Engaging the iGen.”**

*“Almost all of our **undergraduate students are Generation Z.** I like to call them **iGens** because they’re the first generation to grow up with smartphones, iPhones, and iPads,” she said.*

She also shared an analysis of the differences between these young people and other generations based on various cultural trends.

Jean said that Generation Z suffers more from loneliness and depression; **they require more support** and guidance; and **are less independent**, so she suggested that professors **change their strategies for delivering content to them.**

Generation Z, also known as **centennials**, are those who were **born between 1997 and 2012**, with ages ranging from 10 to 25 years.

La psicóloga y autora Jean Twenge fue conferencista en la Reunión Nacional de Profesores 2022.
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Generation Z requires more support and guidance

During the **2022 National Teachers' Conference**, **Twenge** talked about the differences between growing up today as part of Generation Z and what it was like for young people from previous generations, such as Generation X or millennials.

*"The first thing we see is the **speed of their development**, how fast or slow children and adolescents are growing up. One example of this is how **children aren't so independent anymore**,"* said the speaker.

"In the 70s and 80s, it was very common for children to walk to school on their own. Today, parents are much more likely to take them, even if they live the same distance away," she said.

Jean said that this is due to a cultural phenomenon she defined as a **slow life strategy**. Education is being prolonged, and adults are deciding to have fewer children while raising them more carefully.

"College students are Generation Z. They're the first generation to grow up with smartphones."

The professor shared studies showing that young people are **forced to accelerate their development** when they **reach college** but have **less experience and independence** at the beginning of adulthood. So, she had the following advice for teachers:

"It's important as teachers to empathize with their experience. This generation needs more support and guidance."

"It's a difficult job because students come to us with less decision-making experience and we have to guide them for longer and give them clear and specific instructions," she said.

En México, los niños y niñas de la generación Z tienen mayor sentimientos de soledad.
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Warning! Generation Z suffers more from loneliness and depression

According to Professor Twenge, she began to see **changes in the mental health and wellbeing** of teenagers about 10 years ago.

"They thought they couldn't do anything right, that their lives were meaningless. They weren't enjoying life. These are classic symptoms of depression. Since 2011, clinical levels of depression have doubled among 12-17-year-olds," she said.

That trend was recorded even before the pandemic and is also present among **college students between the ages of 18 and 25**.

In 2012, there was a **considerable increase in cases of severe anxiety and depression**.

“Students spend much more time looking at a screen and less time reading books. They read online, but they only read fragments.”

*“In one statistic, I found that the end of 2012 was the first time **most people had smartphones**.*

*“In just five and a half years, smartphones went from being used by half the population to everyone owning one. That’s the **fastest rate of technology adoption in human history**,” the psychologist said.*

She said **that young people spend between six to eight hours looking at their phone screens**, browsing social media, and **less time interacting with each other**.

*“We must pay **attention to students’ mental health** and have resources to provide them with professional help or therapy, to promote rest, better lifestyles, and face-to-face social relationships,” she said.*

Estudiantes universitarios generación Z conferencia Jean Twenge width="900" loading="lazy">

Suggesting changes for how teachers deliver content

The fact that students spend more time in front of their cellphones causes **them to neglect other aspects, such as reading textbooks**, said the psychologist.

“Students spend much more time looking at their screens and less time reading books, magazines, newspapers, articles, or other long texts. They do read online, but they only read fragments as a rule.”

“You have to recognize this decline in reading, especially long-form content because the first thing we do when they get to college is to hand them a 700-page textbook. We expect them to read it, but they don’t,” she said.

To **promote reading among students, she suggested the use of e-books**, which young people can read on their cell phones, even while on the bus, consulting them at any time like they do with Google. They should be **interactive, with quizzes, activities, and short videos**.

“Studies show that students who only see collective technology at the front of the class do better on tests.”

She recommended keeping the e-books relatively short, in a **casual and informal reading style** to motivate the students to keep reading.

“In the beginning, when I was using e-books and giving tests, I was afraid my students would hate them, but they liked them because they could read the material right away, take the test, and then compare their results with others,” she said.

In classrooms, **she suggested implementing technology collectively**. For example, **playing videos of three minutes or less** or getting the students to **create short videos** on their cell phones to later play in class.

She also suggested encouraging students **not to use technology individually**, such as putting away their **smartphones** and even their computers, **as social media notifications are a constant distraction**.

*“There are **studies showing that students who only see collective technology** at the front of the class, while not having their personal devices, **do better on tests.**”*

La psicóloga compartió algunos consejos a los profesores Tec para conectar con sus estudiantes.

Finding motivation to study

The psychologist pointed out that Generation Z students **tend to focus on extrinsic motivation** rather than intrinsic motivation, as was the case with young people from past generations.

She believes this is because both this generation and the millennial generation have been **affected by a recession and income inequality**, in addition to the fact that **social media can cause insecurity**, leading them to compare themselves with others and set themselves goals with extrinsic values.

*“Today, most students **say they’ll go to college to earn more money**. Fewer say they want to get a good education, to share ideas, or to develop a meaningful life philosophy.*

“We also see fewer saying that they actually like the schools or think they are good, that they think the courses are interesting or that their schoolwork is meaningful or important,” she said.

“As teachers, we have to find a balance and adapt to give students what they want and need in the long term.”

Jean Twenge suggests trying to **understand the perspective of young people**, who want to **find out if studying will help them achieve their life goals**, not just learning for the sake of learning.

She also proposes **developing intrinsic motivation in students by using a point evaluation system just like** in gaming, with activities such as videos and discussions about real-world problems to help them remember the material and enjoy learning.

“We know that if they’re intrinsically motivated and enjoy what they do, their performance will be better and they’ll be able to get a better grade to get closer to that professional goal,” she said.

Finally, she said that the question is... *how much is the world going to change in this generation and how much is a generation going to adapt to the rest of the world?*

“As teachers, we have to find a balance and adapt to give students what they want and need in the long term.”

Estudiantes universitarios generación Z conferencia Jean Twenge width="900" loading="lazy">

National Teachers’ Conference (RNP)

The RNP is an annual conference organized by Tec de Monterrey. Professors from 25 campuses, the **EGADE Business School**, and the **School of Government and Public Transformation** get together, about which Juan Pablo Murra, Rector of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies, said:

“Professors share spaces for inspiration, dialogue, and collaboration to detect new opportunities and better practices, as well as get inspired and come up with projects that enrich the learning experience of our students at Tecnológico de Monterrey.”

The 2022 conference was held on-campus at 4 venues: Monterrey campus, Mexico City campus, Guadalajara campus, and Querétaro campus.

Jean Twenge **is the author of six books**, has published **more than 140 scientific articles**, and **is a psychology professor at [San Diego State University](#)**.

Her research has been covered by media such as **The New York Times, The Washington Post, Time, and Newsweek**. She has also appeared on **CBS, FOX, and NBC** among other networks.

In her book **[iGen](#)**, she addresses how **Generation Z** is super connected, less rebellious and more tolerant, **but less happy and unprepared for adulthood**.

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