Z Generation is Here! Recommendations for Counselor Educators

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Abstract

Generation Z, individuals born between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s, are now enrolling in graduate counseling programs. This article addresses the generation's unique characteristics, learning needs, and challenges and how they impact the development of counselor soft skills and dispositions. Implications for counselor educators and recommendations for future research are discussed.

With every emerging generation comes unique characteristics, needs, and values shaped by historical, sociopolitical, and environmental events as well as evolutions in technology. For Generation Z, this is no different. Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, iGeneration, Zoomers, and Post-millennials, is comprised of individuals born roughly between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s. In 2017, the oldest members of Gen Z turned 22 and began enrolling in graduate school (Zorn, 2017). These individuals grew up during the Great Recession (Beck & Wright, 2019), experienced a global pandemic forcing them to learn at home (Marshall & Wolanskyj-Spinner, 2020), witnessed countless school shootings, and were exposed to many sociopolitical issues, including Black Lives Matter (Bellan, 2020), the #MeToo movement and women's march (Packard, 2021), Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; Deckman & Rouse, 2020), and racist legislation targeting Mexican and Latinx immigrants (i.e., "Build that Wall!"; Santamaría Graff, 2017) and Muslim immigrants (i.e., "Muslim ban"; Packard, 2021). They are also the second generation to grow up with smart phones and other types of technology and technology-informed content, including Wi-Fi, social media, and streaming services (Center for Generational Kinetics & Dorsey, 2016).

The Great Recession impacted Gen Z in a variety of ways; these students witnessed their older siblings and cousins, i.e., Millennials, take on massive debt to fund their higher education. They now witness these same family members struggling to pay that debt and delaying marriages, buying homes, and having children as a result (Wang, 2017). Because of this, Gen Z is skeptical of higher education and want to see a clear and direct return on their financial investment in higher education (e.g., a guaranteed, well-paying job; Selingo, 2018). They also wish for transparent tuition and fees, tuition discounts, and fee waivers to help offset the need for student loans (Selingo, 2018). One result most relevant to counselor educators is students are seeking out

professional programs that will lead directly to jobs (Selingo, 2018). Often, this requires students to matriculate directly from undergraduate to graduate education to pursue professional degrees, such as counseling. This direct matriculation of emerging counseling students requires counselor educators to reconsider their understanding of a typical counseling student, consider the needs of Gen Z, and learn how to better support their professional development, while differentiating for diverse generational learning needs.

Unique Experiences

Gen Z have many unique experiences affecting their outlook on higher education and their learning needs. The COVID-19 global pandemic affected the learning and mental health of Gen Z. Students in primary, secondary, and higher education were forced to move from face-to-face instruction to online instruction as a result of the highly contagious virus (Marshall & Wolanskyj-Spinner, 2020). Preliminary studies (e.g., Elmer et al., 2020) show this has negatively impacted the social development and mental health of these students. Additionally, because students were required to learn online, they also saw online learning was a feasible way to accomplish their educational goals, increasing the need for online counseling programs.

Gen Z also encountered numerous sociopolitical events targeting minoritized communities and influencing their generational value for appreciation of diversity in education, communities, and the workplace. Gen Z was at the forefront of leading initiatives for Black Lives Matter, including protests and marches to demand equality and fair treatment for Black persons, while also witnessing the violence and riots surrounding these events (Bellan, 2020). They witnessed a change in women's willingness and courage to share their stories of sexual abuse and harassment and confront their abusers, which ultimately revealed how common experiences of sexual harassment and abuse are in relationships and the workplace. Dehumanizing legislation was passed

targeting minoritized communities, including rejecting new DACA applications (American Council on Education, 2020), building a wall to keep out Latinx immigrants (Santamaría Graff, 2017), housing refugees and asylum seekers in detention centers reminiscent of concentration camps (Carpenter, 2021) and prisons (Saadi et al., 2020), banning immigrants from Muslim dominated countries (Packard, 2021), and the reversal of LGBTQ+ rights and protections from the Trump administration (Simmons-Duffin, 2020). These sociopolitical events, as well as Gen Z being the most racially diverse generation to date (Rue, 2018), resulted in the appreciation of diversity being a central defining characteristic of Gen Z and this value aligns with the counseling profession's stances as anti-racist (Lee, 2020), socially just (Ratts et al., 2010), and affirming (Ginicola et al., 2017).

In addition to these events, technology greatly impacted the development of Gen Z. Because they grew up with technology, it infiltrated all areas of life. They see technology as an extension of themselves and their identity, especially with the rise of social media influencers, YouTube channels, and the possibility to go viral with a TikTok clip (Johnson & Welsch Sveen, 2020). Likes and views often equate to validation and have become a central aspect of their everyday lives and identity (Rue, 2018). Technology is also the primary way individuals in this generation connect and communicate, resulting in both positive (e.g. seeking help) and negative characteristics (e.g. interpersonal skill deficits; Selingo, 2018). Technology allows individuals to be anonymous when seeking out help and support via social media communities. This allows individuals who may not feel comfortable seeking out professional help, such as counseling, and revealing their identity to get the support they may need. Gen Z will also be the most advanced technological generation to date, and their technological influence will continue to change the way counseling is performed as more Gen Z individuals become professional counselors. We have

already witnessed a drastic increase in telemental health services and platforms (e.g. Talkspace, Better Help; Feijt et al., 2020) and easily accessible phone applications (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019) that range from meditation exercises (e.g., headspace.com) to tracking mental health symptoms (e.g., https://bearable.app). With Gen Z's influence, we will continue to see advances in the way technology facilitates mental health help and professional counseling.

Despite technology allowing individuals to seek help in nontraditional avenues, such as anonymous social media support groups, and advancing the way counseling is performed, Gen Z's reliance on technology inhibited Gen Z's interpersonal skill development (Stillman & Stillman, 2017), which was only exacerbated by the pandemic (Bauer, 2021). The inhibiting of interpersonal development resulting from technology might also be detrimental for those Gen Zers wishing to become professional counselors. We will discuss this in more detail in the challenges and barriers section of this article.

Characteristics and Learning Needs of Gen Z Students

As economic and employment trends forced students to matriculate directly from undergraduate into graduate school, many of our current and future counseling students will identify as Gen Z. The historical and sociopolitical events they experienced throughout some of their most formative years, i.e. childhood through young adulthood, directly impacted their values, characteristics, and learning needs. Technological advances will also impact how counselor educators approach instructional methods with Gen Z counseling students.

With the transition to online learning forced by the pandemic, more Gen Zers already have experience with online learning. Researchers (e.g., Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018) found that Gen Zers value the self-paced, self-directed, and independent nature of online learning. It allows them freedom and flexibility to learn whenever and wherever they wish. Although Gen Z desires

independent learning, they also value connection to their peers (Crow & Murray, 2020). On face-to-face campuses, connection is easier to establish with in person class discussions, extracurricular events, intermural sports, and student clubs and services, but fully remote students may struggle to connect with their peers and instructors unless avenues and spaces for connection are intentionally created. Additionally, a sense of caring from their instructors is integral to their success, and conveying care can be more difficult in online programs with less face-to-face interaction (Miller & Mills, 2019). Miller and Mills (2019) interviewed 31 Gen Z undergraduate and graduate students and found that faculty caring was "directly related to student motivation to learn. Students articulated the importance of "caring" to their engagement in class, assessment of the course, their likelihood to succeed, and their willingness to work" (p. 82).

Gen Z also embrace innovative and creative technologies in their education. Traditional technology methods, such as PowerPoint presentations and asynchronous written discussion boards, might no longer meet their learning needs (Boulden et al., 2022). Counselor educators should be aware of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) or virtual reality (VR), and how they might impact future directions in counselor education. Boeldt et al. (2019) found virtual reality can be used in exposure therapy to treat anxiety disorders and this technology might increase the availability and usability of exposure therapy among mental health professionals. Additionally, platforms such as Psious (https://psious.com/) are using virtual reality to train mental health professionals. As technology continues to advance, VR might be one potential avenue for future training of counseling students. Counselor educators can also foster avenues for students to express their creativity and innovation using technology by considering adaptations and flexibility in acceptable formats for presentations, discussion boards, and assignment submissions. With that in mind, as technology continues to inform the field of mental

health and counselor education, counselor educators need to be aware of how the inequities in technological access will only be intensified as the field increasingly relies on technology (Ducharme, 2021). Gamble (2022) suggested the Digital Mental Health (DMH) era is here and counselors need to be keenly aware of how market-driven incentives, such as subscriptions and engagement, drive the development of apps and digital content often ignoring the needs of marginalized communities.

Although the field of counseling recognizes the importance of being anti-racist, affirmative, and advocating for socially just access and treatment in mental health care, counseling theories and treatment have largely been researched and studied on white, Eurocentric, straight populations (George et al., 2014), and evidenced based practice are steeped in Western norms (Kalibatseva & Leong, 2014). With Gen Z's value on diversity, they may be more critical of these traditional theories and treatment and their usefulness with diverse clients. Counselor educators will need to be open to researching and teaching about emerging modalities and culturally sensitive treatments (Kalibatseva & Leong, 2014).

Challenges and Barriers of Gen Z Students

The unique values of Gen Z will bring about many positive evolutions in the field of counseling. New technologies and affirming counseling approaches might forever change how we approach mental health treatment; however, there are also unique challenges and barriers commonly shared by Gen Z students. Counselor educators will want to consider these challenges when instructing, supervising, and gatekeeping counseling students.

Although technology has the potential to increase access to mental health treatment and provide new ways of helping clients (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019), Gen Z's reliance on technology resulted in some adverse consequences for their development. Gen Zers spend more

time alone than previous generations and prefer to communicate virtually rather than in person (Zorn, 2017). This resulted in a lack of interpersonal and communication skills with 37% of Gen Zers reporting that technology decreased their ability to form genuine interpersonal relationships and weakened their people skills (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Additionally, technology and the COVID-19 pandemic allowed students to complete learning on their own, lessening the interaction with peers and instructors in traditional face-to-face learning environments. This lack of face-to-face interaction has been detrimental to not only their social development, but also their mental health with 27% noting their mental health as fair or poor, which is more than any previous generation (Bethune, 2019).

Despite being more appreciative of cultural diversity, some researchers found Gen Zers display less empathy than previous generations (Twenge, 2017). Narcissistic traits, such as defensiveness and being sensitive to criticism, are also linked to Gen Z resulting in their tendency to blame others and not take responsibility whenever they could have done something differently (Schroth, 2019). Criticism of these sentiments argue every generation is less empathetic and more narcissistic earlier in their development and narcissist traits are commonly found in younger individuals and tend to minimize once they reach their first major milestone, such as getting a job (Roberts et al., 2010). It is important to note Gen Z has worked less in their adolescence than any previous generation (Schroth, 2019), which might explain why these traits are lingering longer than in the development of previous generations. This is an important consideration for counselor educators. Gen Z values frequent and immediate feedback (Isaacs et al., 2020) and almost expect it because of their reliance on technology, but they have difficulty receiving that feedback, which could be in part to lack of exposure of receiving formal feedback in the workplace. Counselor

educators will need to find ways to foster counseling students' ability to receive and implement feedback because this is a central aspect to counselor training.

Counselor Soft Skills and Dispositions

There are many skills needed to be an effective counselor, including assessment, diagnosis of mental health disorders, treatment planning, conceptualization, notetaking and documentation, the use of basic and advanced listening skills, and integrating theory into practice (Erford, 2018; Erford & Vernon, 2018; Ivey et al., 2018). We refer to these as the hard skills of counseling, i.e., those needed to perform the job of a counselor (Balcar, 2017); however, counselors also require soft skills and favorable dispositions to be successful. Soft skills are skills that have traditionally been self-taught and self-developed, are learned through social interactions and work experience, and are commonly referred to as interpersonal skills (Febrianita & Hardjati, 2019). Because Gen Zers lack face-to-face interaction and work experience, they also struggle with developing some of the interpersonal skills needed for counseling including communication, resiliency, flexibility, teamwork, and self-awareness (Hernández et al., 2010).

Much of the soft skills or dispositions studied to be an effective counselor come from counseling literature related to admissions and gatekeeping and are determined by individual counseling programs in part to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs' (CACREP; 2015) standard 4.B.1. requiring programs to maintain "aggregate student assessment data that address student knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions." Garner et al. (2020) updated a screening tool for admissions processes to assess dispositions needed to be a counselor. Their tool, the Professional Disposition Competence Assessment - Revised Admission (PDCA-RA), includes nine dispositions: Conscientiousness, Coping and Self-Care, Openness, Cooperativeness, Moral Reasoning, Interpersonal Skills,

Cultural Sensitivity, Self-Awareness, and Emotional Stability. Christensen et al. (2018) performed a content analysis synthesizing the most common professional dispositions found in CACREP programs' policies, evaluations, and rubrics and found students were often evaluated on openness to growth, awareness of self and others, emotional stability, integrity, flexibility, compassion, and personal style. There are differing opinions on whether these soft skills and dispositions can be taught throughout the duration of a counseling program, but many counselor educators positively believe they can with a few exceptions. Freeman et al. (2019) surveyed counselor educators on the nine dispositions of the PDCA-R to determine which they thought were amenable to change throughout the duration of a counseling program. Many soft skills or dispositions are easy to teach if counseling students possess an openness to receiving feedback. Freeman et al. (2019) found counselor educators believed conscientious behaviors, coping and self-care, and ethical behavior were the easiest to remediate, and although openness and cooperativeness are also possible to remediate, they require more time.

Freeman et al. (2019) labeled the dispositions of moral reasoning, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and emotional stability as *tenacious,* meaning the counselors they surveyed lacked confidence these dispositions could be remediated throughout the time in a counseling program. One participant shared regarding interpersonal skills that teaching "the capacity to read social cues and demonstrate warmth…um…that's really hard to teach" (p. 218). Another shared regarding self-awareness, "there is a certain minimal level of self-awareness you have to reach to have empathy" (p. 219). Because Gen Zers struggle with receiving feedback and interpersonal skills, counselor educators will need to consider new and innovative ways to approach these issues and foster openness to feedback and interpersonal skill development.

Implications for Counselor Educators

The unique characteristics, learning needs, and challenges of Gen Z combined with the dispositional and soft skills needed to become an effective counselor result in many considerations for counselor educators when training Gen Z counseling students. Although Gen Z students are highly motivated to succeed, they often are unprepared for the stress and growth mindset needed for the graduate level education and preparation to become a counselor (Schroth, 2019). The ability to receive and implement feedback, foster self-awareness and interpersonal skill development, and to handle not only their own stress but also attend to the emotional concerns of clients are all key skills needed to become a counselor, yet Gen Z struggles with these competencies (Schroth, 2019; Selingo, 2018).

Counselor educators will need to set clear expectations for Gen Z counseling students prior to enrolling in their first course. An engaging pre-program orientation, similar to onboarding for new work hires, can help potential students understand the dispositions, professional standards, and expectations they must adhere to throughout their counselor development; this will be especially helpful for online counseling students so they can also understand the technological competencies needed to navigate their learning (Britto & Rush, 2013). Onboarding reduces anxiety (Allen, 2006), decreases role ambiguity (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2005), and increases performance, retention, and self-efficacy (Bauer et al., 2007). Many Gen Z students have little to no work history (Selingo, 2018), so they do not enter college with an understanding of professionalism and experience receiving feedback from supervisors. Because Gen Z is also motivated to earn a degree leading directly to a job (Selingo, 2018), many students matriculate directly into graduate school to become counselors without gaining substantial work experience. A pre-program orientation as well as consistent and clear expectations enforced throughout their matriculation in the counseling program (e.g., discussions during each course, relating

expectations to assignments/key performance indicators) can help Gen Z understand and build the competencies needed to be a successful counselor.

Counselor educators will also need to integrate opportunities to build soft skills early on in the program to help prepare counseling students for their real-world experiences of working with clients and coworkers during internships (Selingo, 2018). Counselor educators should look for opportunities and assignments that assess and build students' willingness to receive feedback from their peers and instructors. This will help prepare students for the feedback they will receive during their field experience supervision. Foundational to the ability to remediate or help students progress in their dispositional development is a counseling student's openness to hear, accept, and implement feedback should any concerns arise.

Additionally, counselor educators, especially those who teach online, will need to think innovatively about ways to foster community and interpersonal skill development among students. Pasquini and Eaton (2019) suggested rethinking how higher education professionals use social media and note that not only can social media platforms build community among students, but they studied how an academic advising hashtag on Twitter, #acadv, helped foster professional development, exchange knowledge, and ultimately support student success in college. However, counselor educators will need to extend interactions beyond social media and asynchronous exchanges to foster interpersonal skill development. It is strongly encouraged that counselor educators include groupwork requiring students to meet either in person or synchronously to help with these skill deficits. Although they prefer independent work, Gen Zers welcome a mix of independent and group work (Selingo, 2018) as long as they know the people with whom they are working in a group (Kutlák, 2019). Fostering connection and cohesion and gaining peer support is paramount to success in graduate counseling programs and this can be accomplished through in

person groupwork and synchronous learning in online programs (Boulden et al., 2022). Regarding synchronous learning, a graduate counseling student stated, "Instead of just being like, 'Okay, here's a PowerPoint about what we were going to go over about concepts and such,' So, [synchronous learning] is actually talking and discussing things and practicing counseling…[that] has been really good" (p. 103). Programs can also use a cohort approach, where admission groups enroll at the same time in the same classes throughout the duration of their program, to foster interpersonal development among Gen Z students. Additionally, Zorn (2017) noted that Gen Z expects the cohort approach in graduate school.

Gen Z also expects student support services, including mental health and career development, and value these above amenities, such as a gym facilities (Selingo, 2018). Mental health is a major concern among Gen Z students. Of those surveyed, 80% expressed some symptoms of depression or anxiety but only 20% reported receiving help for these issues (Selingo, 2018). This is important for counselor educators to recognize because not only do counselors need to be mentally well to help their clients, counseling services are inaccessible to many graduate students (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021). Counseling centers are often only open during the work day and week, and many graduate counseling students only visit campus in the evening when classes are offered (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021). Rue (2018) shares the importance of providing services outside of traditional 9-5 work hours to accommodate the needs of Gen Z. At times, college counseling centers may even take on students from the counseling program to complete their internship, creating ethical issues for students in the counseling program who wish to use the campus mental health services.

Another barrier preventing online graduate students from accessing mental health services is that many institutions do not offer mental health services to their online students, in part because

of legal and ethical considerations to offering such services to out-of-state students (Stoll et al., 2020). Restrictions in counseling students outside of the state where counselors hold professional licenses are a barrier to ensuring that online, Gen Z graduate students receive mental health services.

Additionally, counselor educators should be up front about costs associated with the counseling program. Gen Z value price transparency (Selingo, 2018) and because they lack real-world experience (Fry & Parker, 2018), they may not be aware of the cost it takes to matriculate through a graduate program with often required and unpaid internship experiences. Counselor educators should work with the career development offices on campus to foster collaboration among community agencies who might offer paid internships and to assist with job placement after graduation.

Recommendations for Future Research

The recommendations for future research for counselor educators regarding Gen Z are endless. Using EbscoHost, we searched the terms *Gen Z* OR *generation Z* OR *iGen* OR *post-millennials* AND *counselor education*, and we found 0 results. Research related to the characteristics of Gen Z is readily available, but how these characteristics impact the ability to train counselors has not been studied. This article hopes to serve as a starting point for this research.

Another concern and gap between Gen Z and older generations of counselor educators surrounds ideas about professionalism, especially concerning technology. The Center for Generational Kinetics and Dorsey (2016) studied Gen Zers, millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers and assessed their attitudes regarding acceptability of using cell phones in a variety of situations. In every situation, but the workplace, Gen Z reported that it is acceptable to use one's phone, including during a job interview, a religious service, their own wedding ceremony, and

social situations. As counselor educators attempt to address this gap, definitions of professionalism may need to be examined and reevaluated with a postmodern lens.

Additionally, beyond studying Gen Z graduate counseling students, counselor researchers should study Gen Z as clients. Focus and attention should also be given to prevention of mental health disorders because this generation is at high risk for developing anxiety and depression more than any other generation (Selingo, 2018). Additionally, they are highly success-oriented in academics and career, which could further exacerbate these mental health issues (Barner Group, 2018). This is also the most diverse generation to date (Fry & Parker, 2018). Studying evidenced based and culturally sensitive practices addressing the treatment of diverse clients is paramount for this generation (Kalibatseva & Leong, 2014).

Conclusion

With each emerging generation entering the counseling profession, counselor educators must understand, meet, and adapt to their new generations' needs and characteristics so they can better prepare the new generation of counseling professionals to serve the needs of future clients. Gen Z, the rising population of graduate students enrolling in counseling programs, possesses a uniqueness that lies within the polarities of their values and struggles. Gen Z values self-paced, independent learning, and are very technologically adept, but they often struggle with interpersonal skills despite their desire for connection with peers and instructors. They seek immediate and frequent feedback and yet struggle to receive and integrate feedback. These polarities highlight the challenge we are faced with as counselor educators; how do we meet the needs of this new population and still maintain our gatekeeping role of the profession?

Counseling programs may pivot and expand their program's instructional methods to allow for more innovative technological integration into the curriculum and counseling application. As

educators integrate of this technology, they will need to consider how it impacts the development of counselor dispositions and skills that are ethically ingrained in our profession. While many strategies and implications are highlighted within this article, the authors call upon our counseling profession to expand our research literature to include the nuances of this growing population so that we may better prepare them to meet the growing demands of future clients.

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