

### *The Romance of Higher Education*

Higher education and romance have a lot in common. Both can be long- or short-term. Short-term relationships may be low risk and could be analogous to earning a badge, watching a training video, or participating in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). It’s a date with an education provider or a content creator. On the other hand, a long-term relationship, such as marriage or a serious relationship, is typically more complex and requires a little bit of luck. Higher education is a lot like online dating or relationship development depending on the goals of the stakeholders.

Dating and relationship development in a modern world is app-driven, using programs such as Tinder, Bumble, Match, etc. How adult learners initially shop for higher education institutions is similar to how users find matches on a dating app! They spend hours researching programs to find their perfect “match” with certain criteria in mind like location, delivery method, institutional brand, etc. Some of these key questions and factors involved in the college search are illustrated in Figure 1 by Ursinus College. The questions the College asks at the onset are similar to questions created with a dating profile using a mobile app, but with a more personal flair.

Online dating follows a similar relational path as does a long-term relationship in higher education, whether it is seeking a degree, multiple degrees, or a post-degree relationship, such as through alumni relations. People use factors ranging from attractiveness to personality to find a match worth pursuing and narrow their search in online dating. However, the common denominator in this comparison between higher education and dating apps is the target demographic— Generation Z (or the new adult learner).

**Figure 1 – Starting a Higher Education Relationship, Ursinus College**



Image Source: Ursinus College<sup>1</sup>

## Generation Z

Online dating apps are no stranger to Generation Z. However, this generation will soon be the newbie on the adult learning block. Adult learners are generally considered those 25 to 44 years old. Currently, that demographic is comprised of Generation X, ages 41 to 54, and Millennials, ages 25 to 40. In the next year, Generation Z will enter the fray as the new adult learner.

The entrance of Generation Z as the new adult learner is cause for a shift in order. How institutions market themselves to reach adult learners will change as this demographic is very different from its predecessors. Understanding these key differences will help institutions better serve their individual needs and create services to generate long-term future success. Several key characteristics and behaviors of Generation Z are exhibited in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 – Generation Z Statistics**

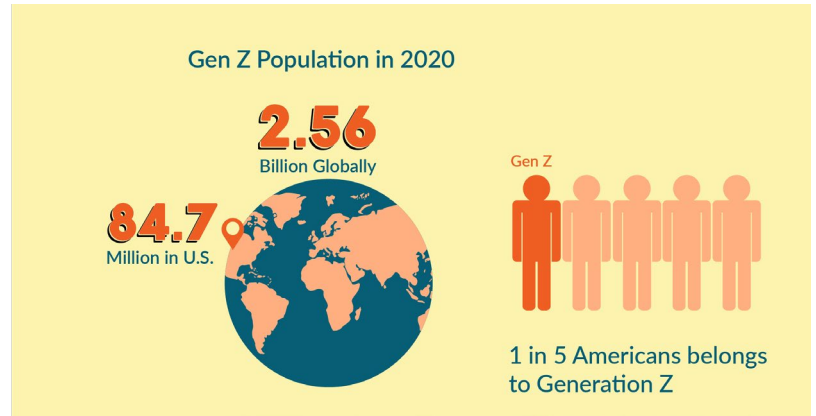


Image Source: Media Kix<sup>1</sup>

For one, Generation Z is highly value-oriented. They seek value in their purchases, from price to quality. They make these decisions quickly by seeking the advice of influencers and the internet. Gen Zers are also extremely socially conscious and look to make a positive impact on their community through their daily behaviors, large and small. Being digitally connected allows this generation to break geographical barriers and make their voice heard. They are notably ambitious and seek educational and professional experiences to generate long-term stability but are also concerned about their future.

**48% of Gen Z respondents said they were stressed all or most of the time.**

Sources of Stress:

- Job/career prospects (46%)
- Longer-term financial future (43%)
- School/education (39%).

Source: Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020

## *Online Dating and Higher Education*

Online dating apps have been extremely successful in marketing to Generation Z by aligning their services with the demographic's psychological needs. Although I am no expert in the subject matter, the methodology is rather simple. Dating apps input levels of information into their algorithms to find user-compatible matches. It starts with a volume approach, then narrows its findings. This is precisely how young people shop. Pew Research shows that about half of young adults have used a dating site. It's likely the remaining half are already in relationships or have no interest in these services.<sup>1</sup>

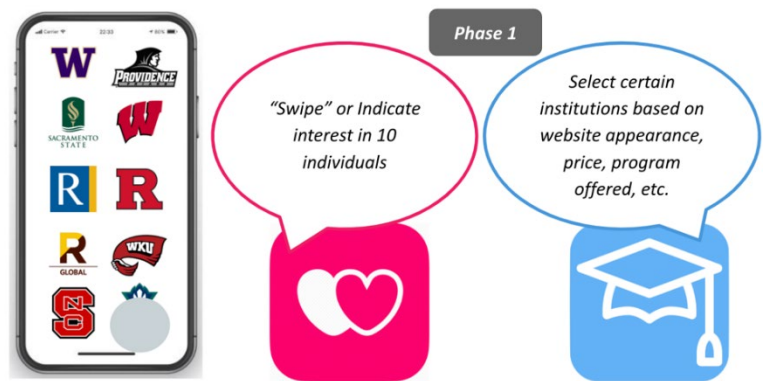


Although their services are very distinct, dating apps and higher education have several similarities. Both services target users of all ages, now including Generation Z, with an emphasis on marketing to differentiate from the crowded field of competitors. Like dating apps, the higher education landscape is extremely competitive and institutions are challenged to differentiate themselves through their identity and offerings. Both groups have to shift their focus as the generations age, and Generation Z becomes increasingly critical to understand. Let's walk through the connection on a more granular level...

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/06/the-virtues-and-downsides-of-online-dating/>

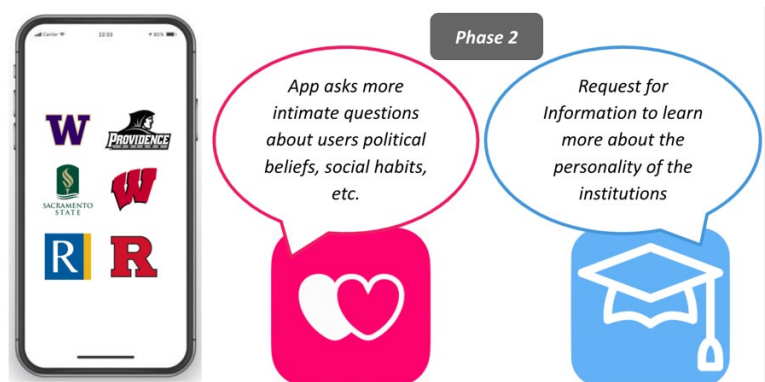
## *The Dating Game of Higher Education*

Finding your higher education relational partner is like finding a match on a dating site. Enter phase one: education prospects start their initial search for the perfect school and could be immediately drawn to a number of institutions. When starting their preliminary search, they begin to eliminate certain schools based on base-level criteria. Elimination happens quickly with top-of-mind misalignment between the prospect and the institution. This initial phase is unfortunately generally dependent on looks and appearance to drive first impressions. Much like online dating, potential partners make initial decisions based on what they see. Such factors for higher education may include programs offered, brand or even appearance of the website. As a result, schools can be quickly eliminated. After initial impressions, prospects may be left with six schools to choose from.



Things begin to get more serious after the easy first phase. Online daters ask more intimate questions, such as the user's political beliefs, social habits, etc. This phase is the equivalent of working down the enrollment funnel. With six schools left, prospective students will dig a little deeper. It's important for you to ask the basic questions and establish a relationship before asking the more important questions. Asking the wrong question at the wrong time will create unanticipated disconnects and thus, lost prospects.

In Phase 2, prospective students may request additional information to learn more about their desired program or the institution at large. Like a personal relationship, this helps them gauge the personality of the institution. More often than not, higher education often cuts to the chase and scares prospects away. Some professional, continuing and online units require prospective adult students to provide employer or parental contact information, as well as transcripts or a permanent address in order to request information. This often will discourage adult students, especially Generation Z adults, from filling out the form. Like a creepy date, the institution becomes creepy and the form is abandoned.

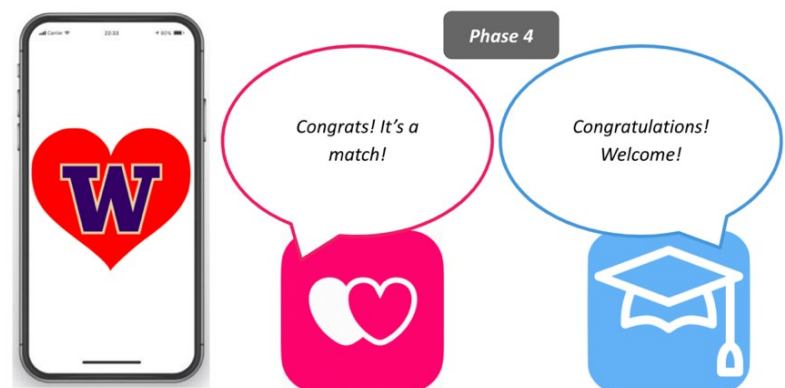


If questions are asked in the proper order and the relationship is developed in a strategic manner, the institution, like the personal dating prospect, survives the cut. For illustration purposes, this may narrow the search down from six schools to three (see Phase 3).

Phase 3 is where it gets more personal. In a personal dating scenario, prospective daters may get coffee or virtually meet-up to explore compatibility. In higher education, prospective students will start to tell these three remaining schools about themselves. They may have now initiated a telephone or video call with the institution or filled out an application. At the same time, they will be seeking additional information about the school to start their more personal decision-making process. At this point, prospective students will look for personality alignment. Personalized testimonials, well integrated social media accounts, or even a discussion are a few ways prospective students may evaluate fit and even visualize themselves as a student in the future.



Finally, in the final phase, the match is made and both parties are becoming more comfortable that the relationship could work. In a well-coordinated response, the institution will be closing the deal by sending application results to the prospect or even requesting a deposit in an effort to formalize the relationship. The prospect sorts through options and narrows it down from high-level factors to more personal, granular characteristics. This logical thought structure allows Generation Z adults to make thoughtful, and informative decisions on which program is their perfect “match.”



The parallels of personal relationships and higher education in a digital world are deeply psychological. Technology, psychology and unique demographics create both an opportunity and challenge in today’s pandemic marketplace, as relationships have become even more digital. It’s imperative to know this new demographic at a deeper level. Mobile application online dating is a strong example for institutions to align their enrollment management and marketing processes as they engage with Generation Z adult learners.

## *Relational Marketing Tips for the New Generation of Adult Learners*

Beyond playing the “dating game,” higher education institutions must begin to prepare themselves, and more specifically, their marketing, for the arrival of the new adult learner. It is critical to reflect upon next steps your institution can take to prepare your marketing for the future. As the adult learner is evolving and growing, along with the society around us, marketing strategies must adapt as well. Here are some factors and tips to keep in mind as your institution evaluates its marketing strategy for 2021 and beyond:

### *Societal Shifts*

1. ***Societal Impact:*** Branding and messaging are different. Do not fully focus the message on the institution. Consider focusing the message on the impact to society and making life better for others.
2. ***Future-focused:*** Prove the value of today’s credential for tomorrow. Proof of performance or practicality is a differentiator. Students also will be more prepared economically for the next pandemic.
3. ***Partnerships:*** True integration with employers is critical. Education can be a retention tool for employees, while partnerships create enrollment and develop the credence of future-ready education. Young employees need post-college nurturing.
4. ***Post-Pandemic Change:*** A “reset” message could provide differentiation. Just as the world has changed, the adult learner expects higher education to change. Do not be the stodgy on-the-hill institution, post pandemic.

### *New Values*

5. ***Transparency:*** Younger generations value transparency. Involving employers and young adults in the educational process to share success and shortcomings could add value and loyalty. Otherwise, they may have trust issues.
6. ***Community:*** Millennials and Gen Z value a sense of community, both online and in person. They also believe in the power in groups.
7. ***Value:*** Gen Z understands value in its products and services. You need to understand and leverage their “values” more than ever. For example, they will spend more on local products because of value and long-term ROI.
8. ***Health:*** Gen Z takes a holistic view of health, emphasizing physical fitness, healthy eating, and mental well-being. Education is an important part of this.

### *Marketing & CRM*

9. ***Influencers:*** You are marketing not just to the potential student, but to their influencers
10. ***Storytelling:*** Build toward storytelling. It is no longer about awareness but creating compelling stories that elicit emotion (rather than just handing them the facts).
11. ***Lifelong Relationships:*** We are no longer in a transactional market, but a relational market. A relationship offsets a shameless competitive promotion.

12. *User Centric:* User design is not just for products and retail experiences ... it is for higher education. Redesign the experience (and credentials) around the potential student and not your SIS, LMS, CRM or even the faculty.

The 12 tips above can help your institution shift its marketing and enrollment management strategy to meet the needs of the future. Marketing has become more critical than ever with in-person experiences dwindling and virtual opportunities becoming the new normal. Keeping the new preferences of this demographic in mind and catering to their individual needs will allow higher education institutions to capture long-term success.

With Love,

Jim