

Gen Z, Wellness, and Creative Engagement

Executive Summary
Summer 2023

INTRODUCTION

The bustle that signals the return to school also begets excitement and trepidation, perhaps most keenly felt by students ready to embark on their first year of college. As institutions of higher education continue to welcome cohorts who experienced the peak of global COVID-19 pandemic social distancing in high school, it behooves administration, faculty, and staff to understand the relationship between wellness and academic success. Earlier this year, the CDC published the results of an Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES), administered in 2021 to high school students. They found that, “more than 1 in 3 high school students experienced poor mental health during the pandemic

and nearly half of students felt persistently sad or hopeless.” For most of the 2027 college-bound cohort, the disruptions to their sophomore or junior years reverberate to the present, presenting universities with the opportunity to preemptively address student needs.

SCADask surveyed Fall 2023 incoming first-year students to understand their feelings, dreams, and uncertainties in anticipation of their collegiate journeys. The findings paint a portrait of resilient and eager Gen Z students determined to succeed. Their answers reveal a healthy balance among enthusiasms and anxieties as they embark upon their creative educations.

THE SURVEY

SCADask surveyed more than 3,850 incoming first-year students with 33 questions in eight categories and received nearly 1,400 responses, a response rate of 36.3%. After establishing demographics and identities, the questions centered around the students’ hopes and fears for their time at SCAD and beyond. The survey responses correlate demographically (age, gender, and location) to reports for Fall 2022 first-time

degree-seeking students, suggesting that the survey features a representative sample of the SCAD 2027 cohort.

From the students surveyed, 74% were 18 years old. Most of the respondents were from the U.S., with the top number of international students hailing from China and India. This is consistent with SCAD’s prevailing enrollment trends, with Chinese

and Indian nationals representing 11.8% and 3.9% of students, respectively. 61% identified as female. When asked for their agreement on a series of identity-based statements (practical/realistic, curious/scientific, creative/expressive, outgoing/friendly, driven/ambitious, and organized/methodical), 72% strongly agreed with “I am creative and expressive.” On a scale of 5-1, with 5 being extremely excited and 1 being not excited at all, 66% reported being extremely excited (5) about attending SCAD. A lesser but significant number of students (43%) gave a “3” to rank their level of level of anxiety toward attending SCAD.

As the survey examines aspirations and concerns, the results reveal common

feelings at this stage of development — the leap from early adulthood to independence. For many young adults, the move to college signifies this transition. When asked who controls their finances, 58% reported their parents or guardians, 27% indicated they were in control, and 14% said “other,” indicating a hybrid arrangement. When combined with survey results relating to staying in touch with family and self-management, it’s clear that parents/guardians are scaling back involvement but have not been completely eliminated from students’ lives. The students are ready to forge new connections, personal and professional, as well as dive wholeheartedly into their creative and academic journeys.

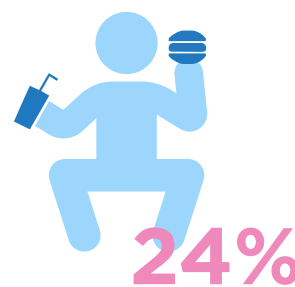
Main concerns when managing well-being:



struggling to maintain healthy habits (routine, sleep, and hygiene)



unable to manage my workload



eating unhealthy food/skipping meals

INSIGHTS

For a cohort who spent at least half of their high school career heavily impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that 85% of respondents report a preference to take classes on-ground speaks to their desire to connect meaningfully with others. With a readiness to learn in the classroom, this Gen Z class is career-driven, creatively passionate, and eager to pursue creative and immersive education while surrounded by people with similar goals.



of parents/guardians control finances.

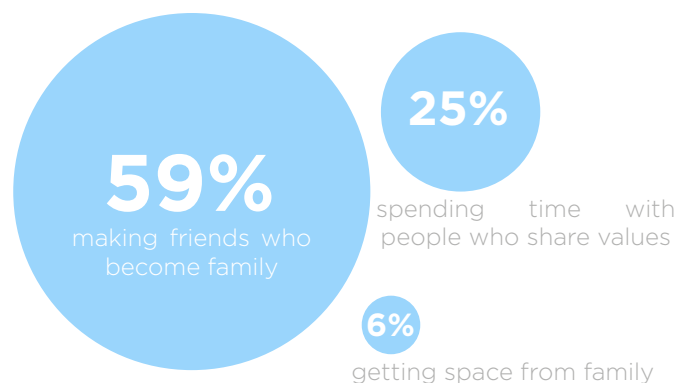
Gen Z's hopes and needs reflect desires for self-improvement in a number of areas while seeking and maintaining social support. The largest concerns, feeling lonely and isolated along with not having meaningful friendships, correspond with the earlier-cited CDC findings of poor mental health among high school students during the pandemic. With a significant portion of high school education spent in varying degrees of isolation, the respondents' concerns about social life connect with the upcoming transition to a new environment and peer group. In addition, 11% of the students will move from another country to attend SCAD, likely compounding the anxieties surrounding social life and forging academic and professional connections.

As industrialized society developed, scholars of psychology observed the birth of a new developmental stage called "emerging adulthood," which occurs in the late teens through the twenties. Jeffrey Arnett in *American Psychologist* identified characteristics of this stage he calls, "the age of possibilities, a period in which ... personal freedom and exploration are higher for most people than at any other time." The

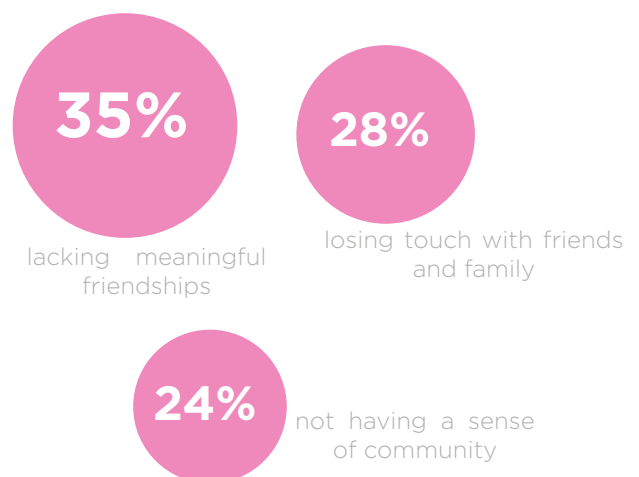
exploration can be intellectual, social, or through identity. Arnett explains, "identity formation involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions." The results of emerging adulthood exploration can take many forms, both negative and positive. In a time of prolific social media use, such exploration is often published and challenging to erase if there's a change of heart. Socially, Gen Z craves deep connections with the desire to avoid "toxic" situations or bullying, desires that don't always run congruent to developing and exploring identity online. However, the exposure to more people online can lead to positive relationships. When discussing Gen Z in a March 2023 analysis, McKinsey states they, "flock to corners of the internet where they can discuss their passions and interests with those who share them ... bonding with both people they know in real life and ones they've only met online." Though these digital natives might have grown up online, it's clear that they value connection: like-minded friendships and the feeling of belonging to a family who provides acceptance, no matter their identity.

In my university life

I most look forward to...



I most fear...



These students — immersed in new surroundings away from their families and guardians while exploring identities, honing creative voices, navigating new academic expectations, and preparing for their lives and careers beyond college — are additionally steeped in news and information about the world around them. McKinsey observes a “behavioral health crisis” that includes a pessimistic outlook and proliferation of mental illness resulting from, “global unrest, wars and disruptions, financial crisis, and educational interruptions due to the COVID-19

pandemic” along with “climate anxiety.” Faced with such monumental issues, Gen Z knows they need to prioritize wellness. The incoming SCAD students responded to health and wellness-related survey questions demonstrating their awareness.

In the midst of challenges that seem bleak, this cohort commands a vision for their future. They are goal-oriented and aspire to cultivate passion beyond graduation with a healthy knowledge that they need a career to help them meet their goals.

Top 5 greatest hopes for college

creativity/betterment as an artist

self-discovery

be prepared for career

learn from experts

forge connections with others in
chosen field

What words describe your most ideal social life while at college?

welcoming

connection-driven

accepting

fun / adventurous

creative

Top 5 worries about college

feeling lonely and isolated

not doing well academically

physical / emotional well-being

losing touch with family and
friends

having no one to turn to for
guidance

What words describe your least ideal social life while at college?

lonely / isolated

exhausting / overwhelming

antagonistic / toxic

boring

excluding

SUMMARY

The pandemic introduced questions of identity, social inclusion, and mental health and wellness for much of Gen Z. Since this incoming cohort experienced nearly half of their high school experience on Zoom and separated from friends, it is natural that their concerns center around their humanity and human needs: friendships, family, connection.

SCADask intends to follow this cohort through their academic careers. It is anticipated that the students' hopes and fears will change as they approach graduation — that their social lives will become more enriched as they settle into SCAD and build a network of friendships and career connections. As they progress, how will their relationships to their families and guardians change? How will they manage their mental health and well-being goals? Further research could help elucidate these questions. Opportunities to expand the research include how the students' experience of belonging and social development changes as they move through their first year, tracking their progress maintaining wellness, how the expansion of professional connections impacts their views on the future post-graduation, and whether their prior concerns are alleviated as they settle into their university lives.

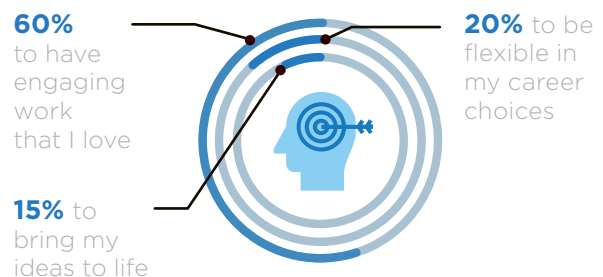
In order to foster a positive and safe space to learn and evolve, institutions of higher learning must promote a positive environment and offer resources to help students navigate the significant changes in their academic and personal development. As a university for creative careers, SCAD seamlessly blends artmaking and academics with career literacy and support to achieve goals at school and beyond.

After graduation...

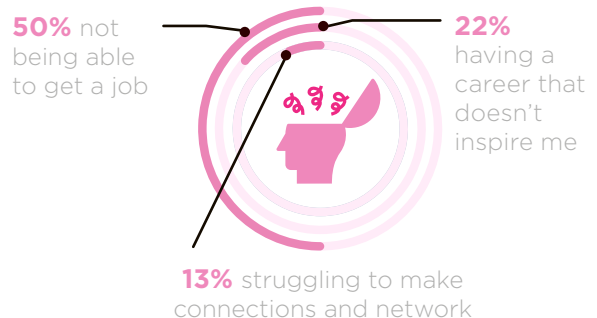
I have a....



My aspiration is...



My biggest worry would be...



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SCADask is an applied research unit of the Savannah College of Art and Design that generates timely research at the intersection of commerce, creativity, and culture. To learn more, or to partner with SCADask, contact research@scad.edu.