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San Diego universities brace for hyper-connected Generation Z

By Gary Robbins

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San Diego County's major universities will begin fall classes facing intense pressure to grow and the need to adjust to a new generation of students who are far different than the millennials they've been serving.

The schools also are caught up in the pointed discussions occurring nationally about whether universities are preserving free speech, and preparing students for a labor market that's changing so fast one scholar called it "unknowable."

The five universities could add 36,000 students over the long-term, helping the state head off an emerging shortage of college graduates. But the largest change could involve the rapid flip in demographics.

The nation's colleges and universities have started to absorb the first generation of students whose lives have always been shaped by cell phones, the Internet and social media.

The digital natives, informally known as Generation Z, are consumed by mobile devices, apps and websites, using them upwards of six hours a day. Analysts say the "Zs" attention span may be as short as eight seconds, four seconds shorter than their predecessors.

“Everybody’s on social media watching everybody else,” said Annika Wong, a freshman at Point Loma Nazarene University. “You feel a pressure to prove you’re having a good life. It’s FOMO: Fear of missing out.”



During move-in day at Cal State San Marcos new student Chloe Cortez, from the San Francisco Bay area, moves her belongings from the parking lot with help of family members behind. (Charlie Neuman/Union-Tribune)

Students want schools to adjust to their needs, interests and lifestyles, and to do so quickly.

“I’m always having to adapt to education rather than having education adapt to me,” said Ella Chen, a sophomore at UC San Diego. “Education evolves slowly.”

The restlessness is widespread. Nearly 40 percent of the freshmen surveyed by the university in 2016 said they were frequently bored in class.

The county’s five traditional universities aren’t planning wholesale changes. There’s particular resistance to introducing across-the-board degree programs online.

But analysts say it will be impossible to ignore a generation of students who are demanding more hands-on, experiential learning. In the past five years,

the Zs have come to represent the majority of undergraduates nationwide. And there are more on the way.

The Union-Tribune spent the last several weeks discussing the upheaval with more than 40 students, faculty and administrators at UC San Diego, San Diego State University, Cal State San Marcos, the University of San Diego, and Point Loma Nazarene University.

Here's a snapshot of what's happening at the schools, which will collectively begin the fall session with about 97,000 students, a record.



Construction began in July on a \$627 million complex at UC San Diego that will feature housing for 2,000 students, two academic towers, dining and retail space. (Courtesy of UC San Diego)

ENROLLMENT PRESSURES

Once again, the dust is swirling at UC San Diego.

Construction recently began on a \$627 million complex that includes housing for 2,000 students, two academic towers, a dining hall and retail. It'll be the largest complex of its kind in campus history.

The project symbolizes expansion pressures that are being felt statewide.

College enrollment has plunged nationally, but it is still expanding in California, fueled by population growth and better preparation by college-bound high school students.

The demand for admission far exceeds supply, and it could mean that California will have a shortage of 1.1 million college-educated workers by 2030, analysts say.

The biggest problems involve space and professors. There isn't enough of either.

The California State University system turned away 31,000 eligible applicants last year while the University of California system did the same to 10,000.

That infuriated students, parents and lawmakers, some of whom say California's colleges and universities aren't focused on graduating students in a timely way.

The UC and CSU are trying to cope with the problem, in part, by directing students to campuses that have the room to build.

That's causing boom times at UC San Diego, which also benefits from its standing as one of the nation's top 10 research universities.

The La Jolla campus is preparing for its sixth consecutive year of record enrollment. The school declined to predict the fall headcount, and it has reason to be wary. Last year, it [misjudged the demand](#) for housing and had to find temporary quarters for 400 students.

It appears that UC San Diego's enrollment will surpass 37,000 this fall, and could hit 40,000 within five years. Future construction has already been penciled out. There's also talk of pushing enrollment to 45,000, making the campus the size of UCLA.

UC San Diego definitely wants a higher national profile. It's currently renovating its campus arena to prepare the school for a move to Division 1 basketball, which could bring the school more attention, and more applicants.

Things are also humming at Cal State San Marcos, which was founded less than 30 years ago.

The school — which has become an engine of industry in North County — is expecting roughly 14,400 students this fall, which would be a record. About 150 of them are currently on a wait list for campus housing.

The university, which has drawn a lot of attention lately for its efforts in engineering and computer science, could eventually swell to 30,000, making it about twice the size of Stanford University.



The University of San Diego enrolled more than 8,900 students last year, a figure that might be broken this fall. (University of San Diego)

It is also possible that an enrollment record will be set this fall at the University of San Diego, a private school that surpassed the 8,900 mark last year. The campus has been growing slowly, driven by rising interest in its maturing programs in business, health, and engineering.

Nearby, San Diego State University is itching to grow, and there's plenty of demand. The school received a record 93,610 applications from students who wanted to enroll this fall as undergraduates.

But the university won't experience significant growth anytime soon. The main campus has run out of room to build, stalling enrollment at roughly 35,000.

San Diego State is seeking the right to buy the Qualcomm Stadium property in Mission Valley so that it could build a satellite campus that would include a stadium, research space, a technology park, housing and other things. The plan could enable the school to increase enrollment by 6,000 to 13,000 over the long-term.

But a private developer known as SoccerCity wants to acquire the same property for a similar proposal.

Voters will be asked to separately vote on both plans in November. It's possible that neither idea will gain the support it needs to proceed.

Even if San Diego State gets the property, school officials say they will not boost overall enrollment until the satellite campus is completed, somewhere around 2037.

The only school that isn't looking to expand its residential undergraduate population is Point Loma Nazarene, a private Christian university that has about 3,500 students. The university wants to maintain the sense of community it's created, and it has managed to attract the number and quality of students it wants in a tough market.



Almost half of the nation's teenagers say they're online "almost constantly." About 70 percent of high school teens go on to college, where they're demanding digitally richer courses. (Getty)

THE POST-MILLENNIALS

There's a lot of debate over when the last of the millennials were born and when the first Zs arrived.

Some scientists say Gen Z began in 1995. Others put it at 1996 or 1997.

Researchers also are debating what the new generation should be called. Gen Z is preferred by some. Others have suggested the name Homelanders (a nod to the post 9/11 era), Plurals (this is the most ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history), and iGen, short of Internet Generation, a name that's gaining cachet.

There is broad agreement that tens of millions of people began to reach adolescence roughly between 2007 and 2009 and grew up during a techno-revolution that saw the rise of Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, the iPhone, the iPad, Android phones, Instagram, and Snapchat.

The cell phones and tablets quickly linked everyone and everything together. By 2011-12, the percentage of teenagers who owned or had a cell phone

surpassed 50 percent. Today, it's 95 percent. Half those people say they are online "almost constantly."

The Zs began entering college between 2013 and 2015. Now, they're taking over campuses.

"It's the most sudden generational change I have ever seen," said Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University and the author of the 2017 book "iGen."

"I empathize with university administrators and faculty. They thought they were finally figuring out the millennials. Now, they have a new generation to deal with, and there's quite a generation gap."

Scientists and marketers describe the Zs as deeply compassionate people who are very accepting of a person's gender, race and sexual orientation. They're intolerant of intolerance.

They're also less independent, less self-confident and less optimistic than millennials. And they are in no hurry to move from adolescence to adulthood, often delaying such rites of passage as getting their driver's license and getting a job during their high school years.

They begin dating later than millennials did. And they're highly concerned about their physical safety and emotional well-being. That may reflect their parent's worries about everything from the 9/11 attacks to the Great Recession to school shootings.

Marketers say that Zs prefer texting to talking to people in person.

Chen prefers face-to-face conversations. But she adds, "I do have to make an effort to stay off my phone. It's my comfort place. It's easier to say things when you're behind a phone screen. You don't have to deal with the repercussions right away."

The smartphone is at the very center of their lives.

“Where their predecessors had a special device for video games, another for playing music, another for making phone calls, and a paper calendar, Generation Z can do all of that with one device that fits in their pocket,” authors Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace say in their 2015 book, “Generation Z Goes to College.”

The Zs “likely never had to purchase or print a map; instead they plugged an address into their GPS or phone.”

Such convenience comes with a price. Many scientists say the heavy use of smartphones and social media can cultivate anxiety and depression.

It’s also reducing the amount of time that teenagers spend reading, says the American Psychological Association. The group published a study on August 20th that says teens are concentrating ever more on texting, posting photos, playing games and streaming videos. Two days later, Pew Research reported that nearly 75 percent of teens check their phones as soon as they wake up in the morning. And more the 50 percent said they spend too much time online.

About 70-percent of high school seniors go on to college. So studies like this disturb Peter Herman, a literature professor at San Diego State University.

“They’re not developing the capacity to read complex material,” says Herman. “You can’t understand the Bill of Rights or the history of race relations if you don’t read. You will proceed in ignorance.

“The world is complicated. It’s not a simple YouTube video.”

FREE SPEECH AND CIVILITY

There’s also a mixed picture when it comes to free speech and civility.

Del Dickson, who teaches political science at the University of San Diego, says, “We talk about religion, we talk about race, we talk about gender, and we’ve never moved beyond the bounds of civility.

“People aren’t afraid to be challenged, they aren’t afraid to get out of their comfort zones.”

But that’s not the case everywhere.

Last year, University of California President Janet Napolitano created the National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement because she was concerned about the spread of political violence and speech suppression on the nation’s campuses.

The move reflected the sort of criticism that’s long been aired by publications like The Atlantic, which said in 2015:

“A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”

Many political and social commentators call college students “snowflakes,” suggesting that they’re easily offended and hyper-sensitive.

Students say they’re being mischaracterized.

“We’re more aware because we are more connected globally,” said Kenneth Tran, a junior at Cal State San Marcos.

Sarah Holly, a senior at Point Loma Nazarene, said, “It’s not that we’re intolerant of words we don’t like. We’re intolerant of people who don’t respect college students, or people in general.”

Her classmate, senior Taeshon Greene, asked, “What’s wrong with sending people out into the world who are more sensitive to the feelings of others?”

IS MY MAJOR RELEVANT?

Many students don't have time for politics. They're more concerned about the labor market.

Almost half of the 33,000 students surveyed last year by Gallup said they weren't sure whether their major would lead to a good job.

The anxiety stems from the increasing disruption being caused by automation and artificial intelligence. Leaps in technology are threatening the jobs of everyone from dermatologists to financial journalists to stock traders.

"We are developing students for a future workforce that is unknowable and unpredictable," said Karen Haynes, president of Cal State San Marcos.

Haynes believes the antidote is a good liberal arts education. Bob Brower, president of Point Loma Nazarene University, agrees.

"Today's students can expect jobs that don't yet exist, in companies or organizations that haven't been created," Brower said.

"It is not simply 'what to learn' throughout the college experience, but rather equipping students with the ability of 'how to learn throughout their lifetimes."

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