NO CAP, NO GOWN EITHER

**THE ROLE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS IN GEN ALPHA'S COLLEGE SUCCESS**

# GEN ALPHA IS COLLEGE-BOUND. ARE WE READY?

By Sav Gray M.S.Ed

What's the difference between an iPad and a pacifier? For the newest generation of college students, there might not be one. That's right, Generation Alpha is heading for higher education in just a few short years and these students, who have never known a world without touchscreens, instant information, or virtual communities, will transform the landscape of student life. The traditional approaches to supporting students are no longer enough. To truly meet the needs of this digitally native and hyper­ connected group, student affairs must evolve. In this piece, I'll explore the ways higher ed professionals must adapt to better engage with and support Gen Alpha. So lock in or risk becoming the future Dean of Students at "L" University.

Before we dive into how we can support Gen Alpha, I think it is important to understand exactly who these students are and what makes them so special. Generation Alpha was born roughly between 2010 and 2025 and they are the most tech-integrated, socially aware, and fast-paced generation yet. They're used to personalized learning, instant information, and institutions that actually practice what

they preach when it comes to inclusivity. A report on some of the oldest members of Gen Alpha found that 97% reported having access to a smartphone at home and that, of these members, 42% say they spend 5 or more hours a day on their phone and 43% agree that they are "addicted" to their phone. While the majority of these members (94%) are familiar with Artificial Intelligence (Al), only 44% share that they have used Al in some capacity, be that for homework or creative purposes. When it comes to social activism and related causes, 60% of the surveyed members worry about the effects of climate change at least sometimes.

Research also suggests that Gen Alpha 1s experiencing higher rates of anxiety and

depression than previous generations at their age. While there are no studies on the correlation yet, scholars and practitioners speculate that the use of technology and social media, along with the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, could see this generation experiencing an increase in menta I heaIth issues, and a decrease in social and emotional development. The pandemic interrupted key developmental and social experiences, creating a sense of instability during formative years. On top of that, social media can fuel unrealistic expectations, increase stress, and make unplugging nearly impossible.

Gen Alpha is bringing a whole new set of expectations and challenges to higher education. The field of student affairs, along with higher education in general, will need to rethink our approaches to supporting students if we want to truly meet Gen Alpha where they are. To do that, we need to rethink some of the core pillars of student affairs. In the next section, I'll break down three key areas that I believe will need a glow-up: engagement, involvement, and well-being.

## Engagement

Gen Alpha is a digital-native generation, and if we want to truly engage them, we need to rethink student outreach. Gone are the days of knocking on doors and posting flyers around campus to get students at events and programming. Don't get me wrong, I think in-person engagement still matters, but it is time we also fully embrace the virtual platforms-many of which may not even exist yet-that Gen Alpha is using.

Hybrid events, digital communities, and online discussion spaces are just a few ways to keep them connected and engaged in meaningful ways.

## Involvement

As mentioned above, this is a generation driven by purpose and the desire to make a real impact. Many of them started thinking about injustice at a young age and they grew up in a world where inequalities were broadcasted to them live on multiple platforms. They are also more racially and culturally diverse than all of the generations before them. For Gen Alpha, involvement isn't just about traditional leadership roles or joining clubs, rather, I believe they will be more interested in opportunities that align with their passions and enable them to create a tangible change 1n their communities. We need to shift our approach to on campus involvement by offering low­ barrier ways for them to get involved. Leadership shouldn't be defined by huge time commitments or climbing through ranks. Instead, it should be flexible and inclusive. Having spent much of their lives being a part of several dynamic online communities, Gen Alpha 1s already connected globally. If we want to keep them involved on campus, we need to prioritize opportunities that empower them to drive social impact and make a difference in ways that matter to them.

## Well-Being

Gen Alpha 1s entering higher ed with a stronger focus on mental health than any generation before them, and they expect us to prioritize their well-being, not just as an

afterthought but as a core part of their experience. Simply offering counseling services isn't enough anymore. Well-being needs to be woven into everything we do. It's about creating a culture where students can easily access the resources they need and feel supported emotionally and physically. But it's not just about reacting to crises. We need proactive initiatives like mindfulness programs, stress-relief activities, and other tools that help students manage their mental health every day. These services should aim to look like the type of content they are already used to seeing: short videos, digestible learning modules, and open conversations. I think the best practices for supporting holistic wellbeing for this generation could include tapping into virtual resources they are already used to including Al support, 24/7 access to services, and, at the very least, hybrid opportunities to seek support and care. This generation is under a lot of pressure, and if we don't start rethinking how we deliver our services now, we are doing these future students a disservice.

I know change doesn't happen overnight. That's why I want to leave you with six practical strategies you can begin implementing now to start preparing for Gen Alpha's arrival on campus.

# Potential Strategies to Begin Implementing Now

* Develop virtual communities and hybrid events to engage students both online and in-person.
* Utilize social media and emerging platforms to promote events and interact with students in familiar spaces.
* Offer flexible, low-barrier leadership opportunities that don't require long-term commitments.
* Focus on social impact initiatives that allow students to engage in causes they care about.
* Integrate mental health support into daily campus life through mindfulness, stress­ relief activities, and proactive services.
* Provide 24/7 access to well-being resources, including online tools, Al support, and virtual therapy options.

It's clear that Gen Alpha's arrival on campus in just a few short years will bring a new wave of student needs, desires, and expectations. While there's still much to learn about these students, student affairs professionals need to start thinking early about how to adapt and be ready to support whatever comes our way. Failing to prepare for the challenges these students will face could create roadblocks to their success, leaving them with a bad impression of higher education and, no cap,

no gown either.

**-SG**