

# Gen Z is weighing the cost of college, and considering other options at higher rates than millennials had

Never-before-seen Gallup and Walton Family Foundation data shows that Gen Zers are 11 points less likely to say they want to attend college than millennials were 20 years ago.

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## ***A note to readers***

Over the next month, I'll be releasing never-before-seen data points from **Gallup** and the **Walton Family Foundation's Gen Z Panel**, an ongoing partnership to examine young Americans' experiences in and outside the classroom. These data sets have been pulled from prior research, but have not previously been reported on.

Thanks to a Walton Family Foundation grant, I've had the opportunity to conduct listening sessions with potential young voters. I'll be doing much more of that and publishing anecdotal takeaways in the lead up to the 2024 election.

These quantitative data sets provide another vantage point into the psyche of today's youngest potential voters. I hope you find them as interesting as I do.

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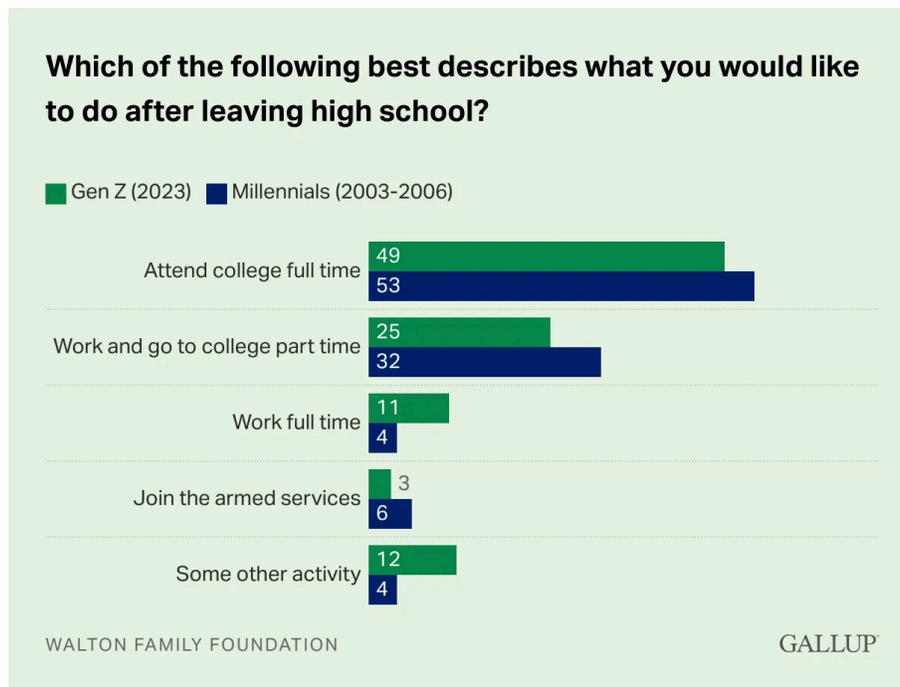
## **Gen Zers are less likely to want to go to college than millennials were 20 years ago**

Gen Z teens are less likely to say they want to attend college than millennials were when they were their age, according to a **Gallup** and **Walton Family Foundation** study conducted last fall. The survey found that just 74% of Gen Z teens ages 13-17 have their sights set on college after high school, which is 11 points lower than the percentage of millennials who said the same when they were in high school 20 years ago.

- While 49% of Gen Z teens want to “attend college full time,” and 25% want to attend college at least part time while working, 11% of Gen Z teens want to “work full time,” which is 7 points higher than millennials reported at the time.
- Just 3% of Gen Z teens want to “join the armed services,” which is down from the 6% of millennials who had wanted to do so.

- And 12% of Gen Z teens are seeking “some other activity” which is a big jump from the 4% of millennials who said the same at their age.

This data is from the Gallup Walton Family Foundation ‘Gen Z Voices’ survey conducted between October 23 and November 1, 2023. It comes as, after a sharp drop around the Covid-19 pandemic, college enrollment rates [started to climb back upward last year](#) — for the first time since the pandemic.



Graphic courtesy of Gallup.

To contextualize Gallup’s data, I checked in with [Zach Hrynowski](#), a [senior education consultant](#) at Gallup. He explained that drops in college enrollment predate the pandemic. “We had seen declining college enrollment even before Covid. So what we saw during Covid, I think was an exacerbation of that, but not necessarily only related to Covid,” Hrynowski said.

Asked for his high level takeaways from the data and about what may be contributing to Gen Z’s collective lower interest in attending college (as compared to millennials), Hrynowski pointed to alternative pathways for current students that may not have been as applicable for millennials, the steep cost of a college education, and societal factors — such as an overall [decline in trust in institutions](#), especially amongst members of Gen Z.

"I think it's sort of the conversation around college, especially cost," Hrynowski said. "I think folks are just less likely to believe that colleges and universities are kind of providing a public service that's worth pursuing, at least as confident as they were in the past."

**Todd Rose**, CEO of think tank **Populace** and author of ***Collective Illusions: Conformity, Complicity, and the Science of Why We Make Bad Decisions***, has [previously](#) talked about why higher education can't sustain a cookie-cutter model. This week, Rose told me he's not at all surprised by this generational drop in desire to go to college.

"It's pretty clear that with the exception of certain degrees, the obvious value of a college diploma isn't quite what it used to be. And so when you factor in the extreme cost of it, it's not surprising that people are saying, 'Well, wait a minute, you know, why am I doing this?'" Rose explained. He said it's not just the fact that Gen Z is less likely to want to go to college that's interesting to him, but rather, the alternative pathways young people are considering that are intriguing.

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*"This 11 point difference is pretty stark. It's absolutely consistent with broader trends. And we should pay really close attention to this. This is not an anomaly. This is something pretty macro changing about American society," Rose said.*

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It's not just higher education where Gen Z has expressed disinterest in conforming to tradition (this whole newsletter is dedicated to what makes Gen Z politically unique, and Gen Zers have so far rebuked workplace norms). So *what is it that's given Gen Z a permission structure to buck the status quo?*

While Rose stressed that "every generation carves out some self identity that differentiates them from people that came before," he credits "a public shock to the system, like a pandemic," as having contributed to Gen Z's aptitude for deviating from prior norms. He said beyond the sheer nature of the pandemic (and the disruption to education that came as a result), there's now an understanding that pre-pandemic

norms weren't necessarily providing the best outcomes — and the “promise of the past paradigm” that a college degree would lead to a good paying job and an affordable house, and perhaps “the American dream,” no longer holds true in the way it did for past generations. “How many of those things are genuinely possible for these young adults?,” Rose asked.

“It’s like a perfect storm right... the combination of the loss of loss aversion if you will, status quo bias, along with that very clear sign that the upside promise of the status quo is just not true anymore,” he said, adding that he believes it’s critical to help develop and promote alternative pathways for growth.

“They need something. They need approaches to developing their skill, finding ways to contribute and finding fulfillment. And so rather than trying to pretend that this will all go back to the way it was, or that if we just cut the cost of college by a few thousand dollars it’ll all be fine, is to miss something deeper,” Rose said. “We would be way better off as a society if rather than looking at Gen Z and treating them as children, we actually see them for the young adults that they are and ask, ‘What do they need to be flourishing adults?’ and I think we owe them a wider range of opportunities to cultivate and to contribute.”

Given the oftentimes prohibitive cost of a four-year university degree, there’s been a push from a variety of leaders, [including the Biden administration](#), to spread awareness about community college and technical school pathways. According to a [January study](#) from the **National Student Clearinghouse Research Center**, community colleges saw the highest uptick in enrollment last year after [facing the biggest drops](#) amid the pandemic.

**Lilly Hernandez** is 22 and a student at **Mesa Community College**. I first met Lilly while writing about First Lady Dr. **Jill Biden**’s efforts to promote what the administration calls “career-connected learning” last year. While in high school, Hernandez didn’t think she would attend college.

At first, “I didn’t even want to go to college,” Hernandez told me this week. “I never thought I could afford it or I didn’t know how to get any help. I’m first generation, my family didn’t know what to do. Anybody else that went to college, they went to

college years ago, so they didn't know what to do any more. It was really hard for me to understand it. And high schools, they preach universities," she said.

After graduating high school, she started working at Lowe's Home Improvement and quickly began to think about potential pathways to a higher-paying job.

"I realized I wasn't making much. I couldn't move out or do anything on my own. I [thought] I probably would be stuck with my parents forever. And, I was like, 'I need to go to college because this isn't working,'" Hernandez said. She asked her former high school principal for help, and enrolled at Mesa Community College; she plans to attend **Northern Arizona University** next year.

Hernandez is an advocate for the "benefit" of community colleges. "It's just more personalized, I guess, if you go to a community college than at a university, and it's a fraction of the cost," she said, pointing to scholarship opportunities.

Hernandez (a member of Gen Z herself) said she understands the generational divide in a desire to attend college.

"The older generations were kind of taught that college is the only way, and the newer generation is figuring out that it isn't," she said. "You could start your own business, you don't have to have a college degree, but maybe that would also help. Or there's trade schools, you could go be an electrician, they make good money. There's other options than college."

"The new generation is thinking that they don't want to be in debt like the old generation. Or they saw their parents that went to college and they're like \$200k in debt, and they can't even pay it back," she said. "I think that really scares them and they know that there's other ways to have a good career without college."

Hernandez pointed to social media as a key factor in spreading awareness about pathways beyond college.

"Everybody sees people posting, 'Hey, I started my own business, here's how you can do it. Or, 'I went to a trade school and I made \$100k a year,'" she said. "There's people posting videos like that and they see it and they're like, 'I could do that too.'"

## A bit about Gallup's methodology

*According to Gallup, they collected responses "via web survey, with invitations sent by email to members of the Gallup Panel, a probability-based panel that includes roughly 100,000 members." The respondents included 12-18-year-olds living at home with parents or guardians, as well as 18-26-year-olds. To reach the younger Gen Zers, Gallup said they, "contacted adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they have at least one child between the ages of 12 and 18 living in their home."*

*"This study explores comparisons to data collected across multiple waves of the Gallup Youth Survey conducted from 2003 through 2005, among 13- to 17-year-old millennials. For waves conducted during 2003 and 2004, the Gallup Youth Survey was conducted via web surveys, using an online research panel designed to be representative of the entire U.S. population. For the wave conducted in 2005, results are based on a combination of mail and web surveys with a randomly-selected national sample of 13- to 17-year-old teenagers from households in the Gallup Panel," according to a Gallup spokesperson.*

*Both datasets were "weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse; samples were weighted to match the U.S. population according to gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, educational attainment, and Census region," Gallup said.*

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