

THE STATE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT ON CAMPUS

How Student Engagement Is Changing – and
What Schools Can Do About It



I Executive Summary

Today's college students are redefining campus engagement. Rising social anxiety and a preference for low-stakes, pressure-free activities mean traditional events might no longer draw the crowds they once did. At the same time, Gen Z's love of nostalgia and appetite for gamified, interactive experiences are reshaping what successful campus programming looks like. This generation is also deeply values-driven: they care about social causes and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) – with roughly [80 percent of college-bound Gen Z](#) considering campus diversity an important factor in their college choice. However, new legislative restrictions on DEI initiatives in some states are creating challenges for student affairs professionals looking to support inclusive engagement.

This whitepaper examines the shifting landscape of student engagement, highlighting key trends in Gen Z preferences and offering actionable solutions through innovative programming approaches. By understanding these emerging patterns and implementing flexible, inclusive strategies, institutions can foster meaningful connections, support student wellbeing and ultimately [improve retention rates](#) while navigating complex regulatory environments.



The Changing Landscape of Student Engagement

Student engagement on campus isn't what it used to be – and that's not a bad thing. As Gen Z becomes the majority of college students, their unique perspectives, anxieties and interests are transforming how they engage with campus life. Understanding why traditional methods are less effective is the first step in adapting to this new normal. Below, we examine the core challenges and shifts driving the change.

#1 Rising Social Anxiety & Low-Stakes Preferences

It's no secret that today's students report higher levels of anxiety and stress than previous generations. In particular, social anxiety has surged among Gen Z students, who often feel nervous or overwhelmed in group settings. In one survey, an astonishing [79 percent of Gen Zers reported experiencing loneliness](#) – a feeling closely tied to social anxiety and depression. Many students missed formative social experiences due to the pandemic, making large in-person events feel especially daunting. As a result, Gen Z tends to avoid activities that put them “on the spot.” A big orientation mixer or an anything-goes open mic night might sound fun to older generations, but for a student grappling with anxiety, those can be terrifying. They crave opportunities to socialize that don't come with expectations to perform or impress others.

Over
60% of GEN Z report
experiencing significant
social anxiety, making them both
the ‘anxious generation’ and the
‘loneliest generation’ on campus.

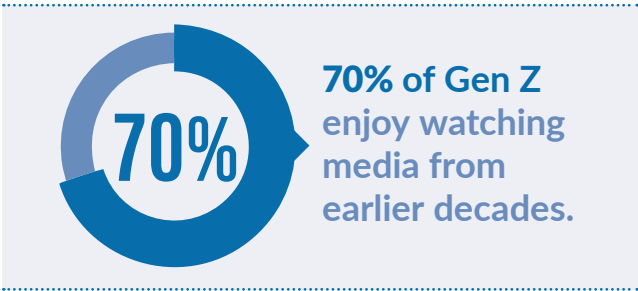
Traditional high-energy events often assume every student is an extrovert ready to dive in. The reality is more than half of young people say they [feel stressed and overwhelmed regularly](#). After years of interacting behind screens, many are out of practice with face-to-face socializing and fear saying or doing the wrong thing. One study noted that Gen Z feels profoundly disconnected socially, even as they crave community – a paradox likely intensified by heavy social media use. Which is why low-key events – like [going to the movies – is on the rise](#).

To match these trends, schools are seeing better turnout for low-stakes engagement opportunities – think relaxed settings where participation can be as passive or active as each student wants. Examples include pop-in craft nights, “watch parties” for popular shows or movie screenings on the quad.

These kinds of events meet Gen Z’s need for connection without pressure. Gen Z doesn’t want to isolate; they do want to meet people and have fun, but ideally in formats where they retain a sense of control and comfort. Colleges need to adjust by offering events that allow students to engage at their own pace.

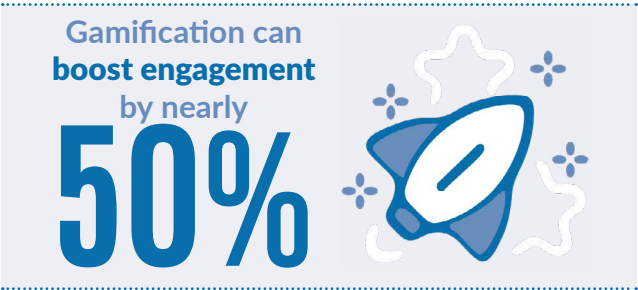
#2 Love of Nostalgia & Interactive Fun

Gen Z might be young, but they have a surprisingly nostalgic streak. They’re often drawn to the music, movies and pop culture of the ’80s, ’90s and early 2000s – eras before most of them were born. In a study by GWI, 70 percent of Gen Z said they enjoy listening to or watching media from earlier decades because it reminds them of a simpler time. For students, retro-themed events (like a ’90s throwback movie night or a vintage video game tournament) aren’t corny – they’re comforting and novel. Nostalgia offers a form of escape and common ground, giving students an easy conversation starter.



Equally important is Gen Z’s appetite for gamification. This is a generation raised on interactive experiences. They respond

to elements of play and challenge woven into experiences. According to marketing research, incorporating game-like features can significantly boost engagement; one analysis found gamified experiences can increase user engagement by up to 47 percent. The campus implication: add a trivia quiz, competition or reward element to an event, and you’re likely to see more enthusiastic participation.



Combining these two trends – nostalgia and interactivity – can be particularly powerful. For example, a trivia night revolving around a throwback film hits the nostalgia bone and provides a fun game. Or a screening of a classic film could include a bingo card of

iconic scenes or lines for viewers to mark off (with a prize for the first bingo). These touches create a sense of play that draws students in without requiring extroverted behavior. They

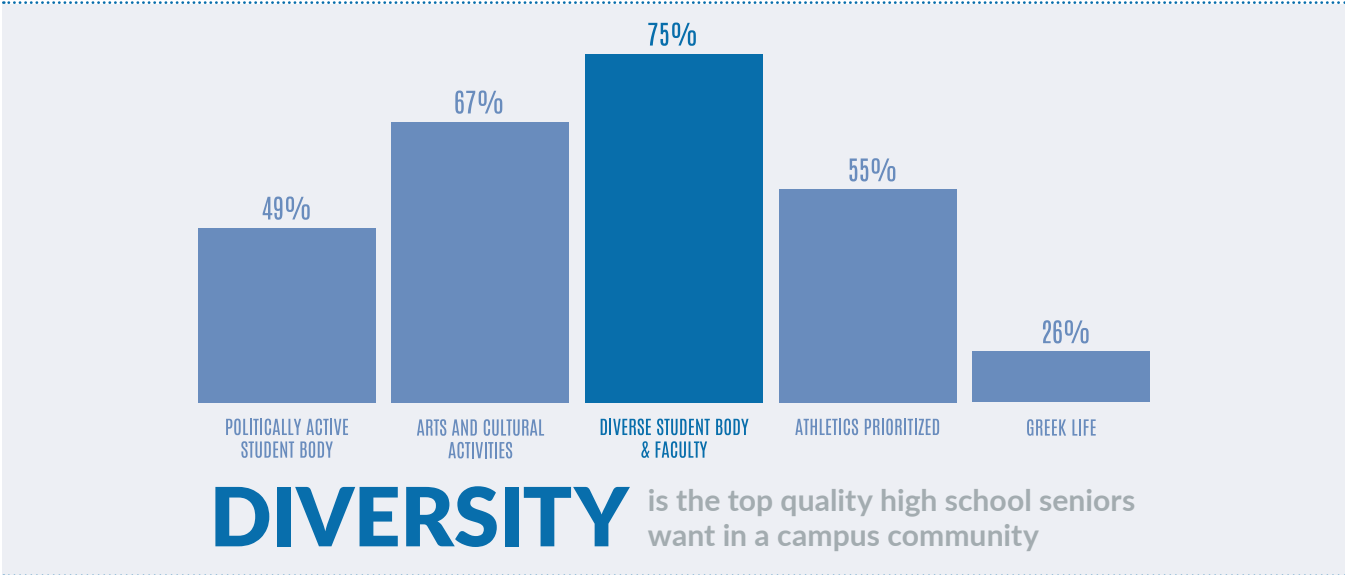
also help mixed groups bond. In short, today’s students often engage best when they can mix the old with the new – indulging in nostalgic content through modern, interactive formats.

#3 Values-Driven Engagement: DEI and Social Causes

Beyond their personal preferences, Gen Z is defined by their strong social values. This is a generation noted for being socially conscious and outspoken about causes they care about – from climate change to racial justice. On campus, this means student engagement is often entwined with activism and identity. Engagement for Gen Z isn’t just about having fun; it’s also about finding meaning and making an impact.

Surveys show that a significant portion of Gen Z college students are actively involved in advocacy or social justice work. [A 2024 United Way NCA survey](#) found nearly 40 percent of Gen Z college students are

regularly engaged in activism or social justice efforts (compared to 24 percent of Millennials) . This might involve attending protests, organizing awareness campaigns or volunteering for causes. Moreover, today’s students expect their institutions to uphold and reflect these values. In one poll of high school seniors (Class of 2024), diversity was the top factor they looked for in terms of campus community – with more than [75 percent of students claiming](#) a diverse student population was either a “must have” or “appealing” and the majority of students wanting a campus where students are active on social issues and intercultural services. Such findings confirm that inclusive campus culture is non-negotiable for Gen Z.



What does this mean for engagement? First, programming that aligns with social causes or DEI values can resonate strongly with students. For instance, a campus might see high turnout for events during Black History Month, Pride or Earth Day. Even entertainment-oriented events can incorporate a values-driven twist – like a film screening followed by a discussion on its social theme, or a charity tie-in where participation raises funds for a cause.

Second, Gen Z students tend to be skeptical of activities that feel inauthentic or that conflict with their values. They will disengage if they sense an event ignores or undermines

issues of inclusion or equity. On the flip side, they appreciate when schools provide safe, inclusive spaces for all identities. A welcoming environment is foundational for them to even show up. Engagement must be crafted with an eye toward belonging: students should see that everyone is invited and respected, regardless of background. This could be as simple as ensuring event marketing features diverse faces and accessible language, or as structural as having a variety of events that appeal to different cultural groups and interests on campus. Essentially, demonstrating that the college supports inclusion – not just in words but in everyday student life – helps build trust and enthusiasm among Gen Z students.

#4 New Roadblocks: DEI Legislation Challenges



But as colleges strive to meet Gen Z's expectations for inclusive and values-aligned engagement, new legislation in some states targeting DEI initiatives has proven challenging. As of early 2025, [more than 30 bills across the U.S. have been proposed](#) to limit or ban DEI efforts on campuses, and at least 15 had been signed into law across states like Florida, Texas, Tennessee and Iowa. These laws range from prohibiting mandatory diversity training, to defunding campus diversity offices, to banning programming that espouses certain concepts about race or gender.

For student affairs professionals and campus event planners, this rapidly changing legal landscape creates uncertainty. On one hand, students are asking for inclusive events and open dialogue on social issues; on the other, administrators must ensure compliance with any applicable state restrictions to avoid penalties. For example, an educational program about systemic racism or an initiative specifically supporting a marginalized group might be scrutinized or disallowed under some of these new laws. Faculty or staff might feel chilled from explicitly framing events around diversity or identity topics.

The challenge for engagement, then, is to support inclusion while complying with restrictions. Schools might need to get creative in how they frame and execute events. For instance, rather than an event being labeled as a “DEI workshop,” it might be positioned as a general leadership

or community-building workshop that nonetheless incorporates principles of inclusion. Or, instead of formally sponsoring a social justice rally, a university might encourage student-led forums or use more neutral branding for events (focusing on concepts like “global cultures” or “history and heritage” rather than explicitly saying “diversity”). It’s a tricky needle to thread: students’ values haven’t changed, but the rules around campus activities have tightened in some regions.

Adapting to these laws requires close coordination with legal counsel and a commitment to still uphold the spirit of inclusion in whatever ways remain permissible. The bottom line is that colleges cannot ignore Gen Z’s DEI expectations – even in restrictive environments, completely omitting diversity and social issues from campus life would alienate a large portion of students.



Movie Programming: A Low- Pressure, Inclusive Engagement Tool

One engagement solution that checks many of Gen Z's boxes is movie programming on campus. Think beyond a passive film screening – today's campus movie events can be creative, interactive and highly appealing to students. Here's why movie-based events are emerging as a go-to strategy for student affairs teams looking to boost involvement:

#1

Movies Meet Students Where They Are

Watching a movie is inherently a low-pressure activity. Students can come alone or with friends, and there's no need to introduce themselves, answer questions or perform in any way. They can literally sit back and enjoy, which is perfect for those with social anxiety or those who are peopled-out after a long week. At the same time, [a movie showing is a shared experience](#) – everyone laughs, gasps or cries at the same moments, creating a subtle social bond. For a student hesitant to attend a networking event or party, a movie night provides a sense of community without spotlight.

How to Adapt Your Student Strategy for Gen Z

- **Offer low-pressure, casual events**

Choose formats like movie nights, craft bars or open lounge hours where participation is relaxed.

- **Add gamified elements**

Boost participation by incorporating an interactive element to your programming like digital trivia, bingo or scavenger hunts.

- **Align with student values**

Create opportunities that support inclusion, social impact and activism.

- **Promote diverse representation**

Ensure your events reflect the variety of identities and cultures on campus through content, speakers and visuals.

- **Navigate DEI laws with creativity**

Focus on inclusive themes like global cultures, wellness or community without violating new regulations.

- **Empower students**

Let student leaders co-create events and weigh in on programming to ensure authenticity and relevance.

Cost is another major consideration. Today’s students are facing real financial pressure: [80 percent report concerns about affording monthly expenses](#), and nearly [60 percent have considered dropping out](#) due to financial stress. Access to entertainment is often one of the first things sacrificed; subscribing to all [major streaming services would cost around \\$79 per month](#), and, on average, it costs more than [\\$16 for a single movie ticket](#) – without factoring in concessions. These are costs many students simply cannot afford – especially on a regular basis. Free or affordable campus movie screenings meet this cost-conscious generation where they are, providing entertainment and connection without the financial barrier.



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What’s more, Gen Z’s interest in moviegoing is rising again. [Eighty-five percent of Gen Z reported going to the movies in the past year](#), with [23 percent attending five or more times](#). This enthusiasm, paired with the casual, communal nature of campus screenings, makes movie events a perfect fit for today’s students – blending the comfort of a solo Netflix session with the energy of a shared experience.

#2

Built-In Nostalgia and Pop Culture Appeal

With a robust film library, schools can select titles that resonate strongly with Gen Z interests. This could mean a throwback to a childhood favorite, which usually trigger nostalgia and draw students in droves. On the flip side, showing recent blockbusters or the latest Marvel movie taps into current pop culture that students are already discussing. Either way, movies provide common ground. A well-chosen film can attract students from various cliques and backgrounds – it’s a conversation starter and a way to bring the campus together for a couple of hours. Schools can even poll students on what movies they want to see, which further increases engagement (students feel heard)

and anticipation. Themed screening nights (e.g., Cult Classics, International Film Festival in partnership with language clubs) can tie into that values-driven engagement too, exposing students to diverse stories in an approachable format.



#3 Interactive Enhancements

Many colleges are adding interactive elements to transform a simple screening into an immersive experience. For example, Swank offers customers a unique add-on called Screen Play by Swank, which allows live trivia and bingo games to be played while they watch the featured flick. Students use their phones to answer fun trivia questions or follow along with bingo squares, with live results displayed for everyone. This kind of gamification turns movie-watching into a group game, boosting engagement without forcing anyone into an uncomfortable situation – participation is as easy as a tap on their phone, and completely optional.



#4 Inclusivity and DEI Through Films

Movies are a storytelling medium, and campuses can leverage them to celebrate diversity and spur important conversations in a comfortable setting. Hosting film nights featuring stories and filmmakers from various cultures or identities can indirectly support DEI goals in a way that might sidestep restrictive policies. Instead of presenting events with explicit labels tied to specific identities – like “Celebrate Black History Month” or “LGBTQ Pride Film Series” – which might be scrutinized under certain state mandates, campuses can focus on broad cultural themes that carry just as much impact. Positioning film events under

themes like “Stories That Inspire Change” or “Voices of History and Hope” offers meaningful engagement while aligning with a wider range of institutional comfort levels.



Positioning film events under themes offers meaningful engagement while aligning with institutional comfort levels.

Plus, these screenings could be followed by an optional, informal discussion circle. The event isn't billed as a "DEI program" per se – it's a movie night – yet it achieves the exposure and dialogue that enrich students' understanding of the issue. Likewise, showing movies during heritage months (e.g., Asian American documentaries during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, LGBTQ+-themed films during Pride, etc.) signals to students that their identities are recognized and validated on campus. In short, movies can be a Trojan horse for inclusion: they draw people in for entertainment, then naturally open hearts and minds to diverse perspectives, all within the bounds of compliant programming.



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Benefits of Movie Programming

- It's inviting to students with **social anxiety** (no active participation required, but still a shared activity).
- It taps into **nostalgia and pop culture**, speaking to Gen Z's interests.
- It can include **gamification/interactive layers** that boost involvement (trivia, polls).
- It can be used to **promote inclusion and discussion** around important topics, in a subtle, accessible way that doesn't impede on any new restrictions.
- It's scalable and **sustainable** as a recurring program.

I About Swank Motion Pictures

Swank Motion Pictures is a leading campus engagement partner and the world’s largest non-theatrical distributor of movies. For over 85 years, Swank has helped universities, K-12 schools and other institutions legally screen films through public performance licensing.

Our extensive catalog features thousands of titles from major Hollywood studios and independent creators – from timeless classics to the latest releases – allowing organizations to curate the perfect entertainment or educational event.



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