

Project Gen Z asks whether college teaching is working for current students

Approach centers student voices to better engage them in active learning

By Gabriela Harrod, ASU News
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Are best practices in college biology teaching, built on 30-plus years of research, working for Gen Z students? That is the driving question for Project Gen Z, an initiative that embeds Gen Z undergraduates as researchers in the study of how learning is changing.

Project Gen Z is led by President's Professor [Sara Brownell](#) and one of her PhD students, [Benjamin Chan](#), who is also a member of ASU's Research for Inclusive STEM Education (RISE) Center. The project grew out of observations in BIO 360: Animal Physiology, an upper-division course that enrolled 336 students this semester.

"Biology education research has identified best practices for teaching, especially in large courses," Chan said. "But we started seeing that those practices were no longer working the way we expected."

From confidence to curiosity

BIO 360 was designed with active learning and evidence-based practices, standing out from many large courses with its frequent data collection and iterative tweaks. For years, those adjustments produced strong results, and at one point Brownell felt the course was optimized.

"After about six years of teaching the course and revising based on student feedback, I felt confident in the way it was structured and delivered," said Brownell, who pointed out that BIO 360 has always been student centered and well liked by students.

At that stage, she admitted, she reduced the frequency of tweaks.

“I got cocky. Not only did I feel like the course was a well-oiled machine at this point, but I was a recognized research expert on teaching large-enrollment courses, so I started doing more telling students why I did things the way I did than asking and listening to student experiences.”

When student performance and engagement dropped one year, at first Brownell and Chan thought it was just a fluke. However, when it happened a second year in a row, the change forced a reassessment: Are teaching practices developed over the past decades still aligned with how Gen Z students learn?

They decided not to just ask Gen Z students their thoughts, but to bring them directly into the research team.

“They help shape the questions, interpret the findings and explain what instructors are seeing in the classroom,” Chan said.

Fourteen undergraduates, drawn from the BIO 360 course where they noticed the generational shift, are now core members of Project Gen Z, helping to brainstorm ideas, collect and analyze data, co-author papers and recommend course changes.

Why teaching must adapt

Gen Z students have grown up with ubiquitous smartphones and digital media. Many experienced disrupted schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Generative artificial intelligence is now widely used in coursework.

“These changes alter how students read, focus and engage with information,” Chan said.

Many students no longer rely on traditional textbook readings. Some organize tasks on learning platforms differently than instructors expect. Some are more hesitant to engage in small talk or in-person peer discussion after years of remote learning.

“The evolution of college courses is not keeping pace with the technological changes or changes in student engagement. ... We are interrogating best practices based on decades of education research, including some of my own published recommendations. I don’t know of anyone doing this like we are,” Brownell said.

Brownell said the course now places greater emphasis on explaining why activities matter, offering students agency and responding to feedback quickly. More importantly, the setback in BIO 360 revealed that the course had been overlooking one of its most powerful ingredients: a genuinely dynamic classroom in which student voices mattered and decisions were shaped by their input.

“What made the course especially effective in its earlier iterations was that students knew their voices affected the class,” Brownell said. “Given what we now know about Gen Z students, that kind of responsiveness is even more important.”

BIO 360 as a responsive classroom

BIO 360 now functions as a highly responsive, community-oriented course despite its large size. Students complete a survey in the first week, sharing information about themselves ranging from their commute to career [interests](#). Students use [name tents](#) so instructors and peers can address each other by name.

Faculty and teaching assistants arrive 15 minutes early to greet students and build rapport. Class time prioritizes peer discussion, writing activities that prompt students to apply and evaluate their learning in the moment, and choices that let students pursue topics they find meaningful.

“These small practices add up,” Chan said. “They help students feel seen and valued, even in a room with more than 300 people.”

Brownell stressed that responsiveness does not mean lowering standards. It means making the learning process transparent, collaborative and personalized.

The teaching team implements many changes during the same semester rather than waiting for the next one. Some are logistical, like giving students the chance to opt in to reminders for assignments, but others are more significant, such as giving students an alternative grading scheme based only on exams after some students said the active-learning format wasn’t working for them. Content is also curated to connect to current events or the specific research areas of the teaching assistants assigned to the course.

“If a student asks a really compelling question, sometimes I add it into the next class and have all students ponder it. Talk about feeling like you have influence in the class when over 300 students are engaged in conversations about your question,” Brownell said.

Mattering and agency

One early and striking outcome from the project is how much the sense of feeling like they matter is essential to Gen Z students. Brownell said students report they do not feel like numbers in the class. They feel like individuals whose presence influences peers’ learning.

Project Gen Z aims to translate that insight into practical teaching choices for other instructors and institutions — choices that support learning while preserving rigor, which can challenge the notion that large classes can’t be personal or responsive to students.

Brownell added that many of the most effective practices are low-tech and relational.

“It is literally handing out worksheets or asking someone about their weekend plans,” she said. “Tiny interactions and genuine listening can lead to students feeling like they matter even in large classes.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



President's Professor Sara Brownell speaks during a class session of BIO 360: Animal Physiology — one of the largest lectures in the School of Life Sciences. Brownell is rethinking how college teaching works for current students. Courtesy photo

Text image(s)



Benjamin Chan speaks with BIO 360 students. Courtesy photo



Students complete a class worksheet with their name tents in front of them. Courtesy photo