THE TRANSITION GENERATION

How College Students Are Navigating Life’s Biggest Firsts

Wired Research Consumer Mindset Series

THE YEARS OF BECOMING

Every generation experiences defining transitions. For many young adults, college is a period when the familiar structures of adolescence begin giving way to decisions they start making for themselves. These years extend far beyond earning a degree. Students are determining what independence means and what kind of future feels possible.

Wired Research's study of 1,000 U.S. college students ages 18–25 finds that the move toward adulthood is gradual. Just 5% say they already feel like full-fledged adults, while 56% say they will know they are adults when they can completely support themselves financially.

Wired Research calls this audience the Transition Generation. This is not a claim about all of Gen Z, but a lens on college students navigating a distinctive life stage. For brands, understanding transition can be more revealing than age alone.

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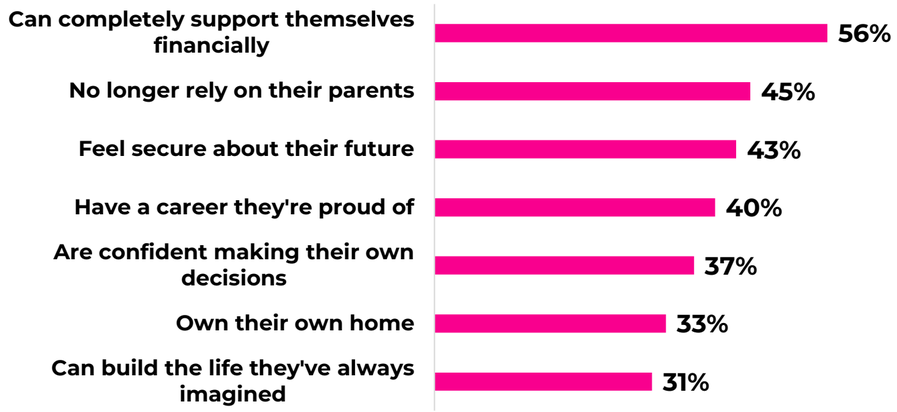
THE TRANSITION GENERATION, DEFINED

There is no universal milestone that turns a student into an adult. For some, the marker is financial freedom. For others, it is the confidence to make consequential decisions without relying on someone else. Nearly all (95%) college students admit they don't yet feel like a full-fledged adult. They'll know they are when they:



These findings portray transition as an active process, not a status someone either has or has not achieved. The defining feature is the accumulation of first experiences through which students learn to make choices for themselves.

THE CONFIDENCE GAP

College students are taking on greater responsibility, but are not feeling completely prepared:

- 3 in 4 (75%) are not fully confident managing their personal finances
- 7 in 10 (70%) are not completely confident making important life decisions on their own

The Transition Generation is moving forward while still developing certainty. Brands can help by making unfamiliar decisions easier to understand without diminishing students' independence.

THE FIRSTS THAT CARRY UNCERTAINTY

First experiences open possibilities, but they also introduce uncertainty. Nearly all students (97%) identify at least one area of adulthood that feels uncertain. Financial security leads the list at 43%, followed by buying a home (36%) and building a successful career (34%).

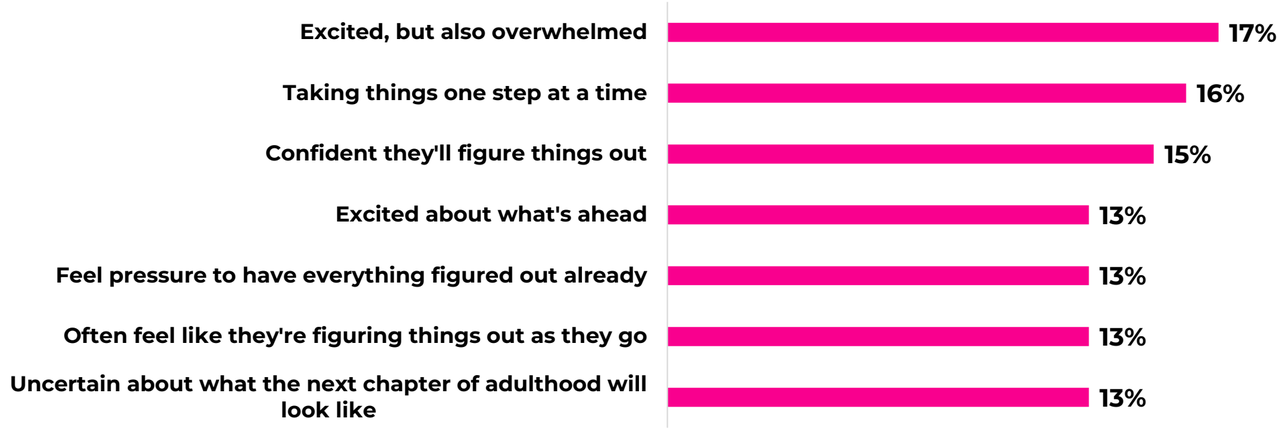
One in 3 (33%) cite maintaining good mental health, while 32% are uncertain about making sound long-term decisions. These findings complicate a simple narrative of youthful optimism. Students may feel capable of making decisions without knowing whether those decisions will lead to the futures they envision.

For brands, these are more than future purchase categories. They are moments when credible guidance and practical support can make a difference. The first experience with a product or service can set expectations for what comes next.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

The transition to adulthood is neither a single milestone nor a uniform experience. For today's college students, the next chapter brings a mix of excitement and uncertainty, as they begin navigating greater independence while still figuring out what adulthood will look like.

Rather than approaching the future with a single dominant mindset, college students express a wide range of perspectives about what lies ahead:



These findings reinforce a defining characteristic of the Transition Generation: students are moving toward adulthood with varying degrees of confidence, clarity and readiness. Yet all are experiencing a period when expectations are evolving and important decisions are beginning to take shape.

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WHAT THE TRANSITION GENERATION MEANS FOR BRANDS

College students are often treated as a younger consumer segment defined by limited budgets. That perspective misses the more consequential story: students are beginning to establish the standards they will use to evaluate brands as independence grows.

When asked what is becoming more important in deciding which brands to trust, 45% chose affordable prices, 42% high quality, 40% trustworthiness and 39% honesty and transparency. Another 31% want brands that make life easier.

The opportunity is not simply to celebrate independence in advertising, marketing and communications. It is to demonstrate how a brand helps someone navigate an unfamiliar choice. Earning consideration during a first purchase does not guarantee lifelong loyalty, but it creates an opening for a relationship built on useful experiences and promises kept.

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THE TRANSITION GENERATION TOOLKIT

The rise of the Transition Generation challenges brands to rethink how they understand and engage consumers during one of life's most formative stages. As college students navigate greater independence, they are making important decisions while still developing the confidence to make them. For brands, this creates an opportunity to move beyond traditional generational marketing and recognize the moments when consumer expectations, habits and loyalties are beginning to take shape.

For insight, marketing and communications teams, this means understanding not just what young consumers want today, but how their experiences are shaping the decisions they will make tomorrow. The following five strategies can help brands connect with consumers during life's biggest transitions and build relationships that extend well beyond them.

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1. Research Life Stages, Not Just Generations

Age alone doesn't explain what consumers need. Move beyond traditional generational segmentation to understand how major life transitions influence attitudes, expectations and purchasing decisions. Studying consumers during periods of change can reveal emerging needs before behaviors become firmly established.

2. Design for First-Time Decision Makers

Many college students are navigating unfamiliar decisions without the benefit of prior experience. Identify where consumers encounter uncertainty and develop products, experiences and communications that simplify complexity. Brands that make important firsts easier to navigate have an opportunity to become trusted resources.

3. Build Confidence, Not Just Awareness

Brand familiarity doesn't necessarily translate into consumer confidence. With many students falling short of feeling very confident about navigating adulthood, brands should look beyond awareness metrics to understand where consumers need reassurance. Use research to identify confidence gaps and create educational content that helps consumers make informed decisions independently.

4. Earn Trust Before Habits Take Hold

The transition into adulthood is a period when purchasing preferences and expectations are still developing. Rather than focusing exclusively on immediate conversions, identify opportunities to demonstrate value during early consumer experiences. Transparent communication and consistent delivery can help establish relationships that continue as consumers' needs evolve.

5. Tell Stories About Progress, Not Perfection

Today's college students are moving toward independence without necessarily feeling fully prepared for everything adulthood requires. Replace idealized narratives of success with stories that acknowledge the realities of learning through experience. Celebrate meaningful milestones and position brands as partners in progress rather than promising effortless outcomes.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The Transition Generation survey reached 1,000 American college students defined as US adults ages 18-25 enrolled in college full-time for the 2026-2027 school year. The survey was conducted online in August 2026 using an email invitation and an online survey. The study has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 %.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results.

In this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 3.1 percent from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all personas in the universe represented by the sample. The margin of error for any subgroups will be slightly higher.

Thank You.

The Transition Generation is the second installment in the Wired Research Consumer Mindset Series, where we create proprietary research that helps brands understand emerging consumer shifts and turn insight into stories they can own. To discuss how your organization can build a more meaningful, research-driven narrative, contact us at info@wiredresearch.com or visit www.wiredresearch.com