

Trends 2024



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The Higher Learning Commission provides a yearly list of trends at each annual conference, reflecting the ecosystem and issues impacting postsecondary education. In 2024, the climate at our nation's colleges and universities is filled with exponential change, amazing opportunities, and many challenges. The trends list is not prioritized; that is the task we encourage you to complete on your campus. Hold discussions to identify those that impact your institution the most, and identify ways you are managing to lead, adapt and learn from this helicopter view of higher education. Executive teams, departments, board members, and other groups have benefitted from using the HLC trends to take a deep dive into their own strategic priorities. We also encourage you to share the list with students to keep them informed and seek input as to what we might be missing. All follow-up input to HLC is welcome!

An electronic version of this document can be found at:
hlcommission.org/trends2024

Barbara Gellman-Danley, Ph.D.
President

1. Artificial Intelligence (AI) – Promises, Opportunities, and Threats

- a. The use of Artificial Intelligence is growing within higher education, in particular Generative AI, i.e., ChatGPT.
- b. There are many AI applications for teaching and learning available, and more on the horizon.
- c. Universities are conducting research to test and develop new scalable products.
- d. Personalized instruction will be enhanced through AI.
- e. Institutional policies for use of AI will require statements on several topics, i.e., ethics, ownership, privacy, fraud, and integrity of information. Risk management is important – both using AI and the risk of ignoring it.
- f. There are many ways AI is enhancing the work of institutions, such as generating job descriptions and other administrative tasks.
- g. More sophisticated applications such as Machine AI are permeating higher education. Facial recognition is one example that can be very useful on campuses.
- h. Colleges will benefit through professional development in the applications of AI. Artificial Intelligence will have a major impact on how institutions operate in the future.

2. Teaching, Learning and Enrollment Paradigm Shifts

- a. Online learning grew exponentially during the pandemic out of necessity, and post-pandemic learners of all ages expect that option to continue.
- b. Institutions are implementing or exploring the use of some “three-year” bachelor degrees, which could be a decreased timeline for the traditional 120 credit hours or a shift in selected programs to a total of 90. Students are seeking adaptive and flexible delivery choices. In general, institutional accreditors have signaled their willingness to implement or study such degree programs, either under existing policies or creating new ones. Federal and state compliance requisites need to be considered early in the planning process.
- c. Faculty face ongoing challenges to historical traditions of shared governance and tenure. Key influencers are weighing in on these historical values of higher education, while governing boards are also debating the issues. It raises the growing question of who is in charge of higher education in this changing landscape.
- d. Institutions are now required to adapt to the end of race-conscious admissions policies due to a landmark Supreme Court decision. Some states have also weighed in on the issue with new policy requirements, at times tied to funding. It is possible more historical

decisions will be changed or reversed. Higher education is prominently on the radar in many arenas.

- e. Legacy admissions is facing a paradigm shift due to external pressure, influencing enrollment practices and public perceptions of equity in higher education. Institutions with highly selective admissions are most impacted.

3. Outcomes and Accountability for Programs and Institutions

- a. Institutions are becoming increasingly adept in using data analytics to measure and predict outcomes.
- b. Many smaller colleges may not have sufficient resources to utilize or sustain the software, technology and institutional research needed.
- c. Outcomes-based funding is increasing, with some states investing in sophisticated methodologies for measuring student success. Identifying the most reliable data and useful outcomes metrics is a challenge for all; the measurements go far beyond simple graduation rates.
- d. The pressure for reliable job placement numbers by program is palpable and will continue to be demanded by consumer protection groups, the public and elected officials.
- e. Beyond quantitative metrics, “student intent” is important in demonstrating evidence-based outcomes.
- f. Institutions will need to work collaboratively with stakeholders on metrics that matter most.

4. Financial Challenges and Opportunities Across All Sectors

- a. Small private college mergers, affiliations and closures are on the rise.
- b. With increased competition from within and outside of higher education, students have more choice. Some institutions will not survive.
- c. Deferred maintenance and other capital expenses continue to put pressure on all colleges and universities.
- d. The demographic cliff is real with fewer younger students in the pipeline moving from K-12 to postsecondary education.
- e. The cost of technology and concomitant depreciation continues to impact the bottom line.
- f. Partnerships for shared services may lower costs; it is vitally important to approach these arrangements

with clear memoranda of understanding and contracts related to the responsibilities and financial impact for each entity.

- g. Reserves and endowments are critical to the financial sustainability and operations of any college. While the stock market is stable in the first quarter of 2024, colleges face an unpredictable future regarding returns.
- h. Some elected officials continue to push for legislation to tax large college endowments.
- i. International student enrollments are stabilizing, although political shifts could influence the numbers.
- j. Institutions will need sophisticated risk-management procedures and policies to assure financial stability.
- k. While enrollment numbers are improving as a whole, institutions will need realistic, evidence-based plans to stabilize, increase, or right-size capacity for sustainability and growth.
- l. Donor support and grants are advancing the important work of higher education and the many communities served. Leadership will be expected to demonstrate successful fundraising outcomes.

5. New Business Models Emerging for Innovation and Sustainability

- a. Students are increasingly able to use subscription models to choose courses and programs from multiple institutions. Colleges and universities are working with consortia and other partnerships to provide increased offerings and choice.
- b. Postsecondary institutions are partnering strategically with employers to co-design educational programs and talent pathways to help meet workforce needs.
- c. Institutions are restructuring with new business models that remove silos between credit and non-credit offerings.
- d. Systems of higher education are also changing structures to meet student needs, while assuring both stability and response to the changing landscape of postsecondary education. More branch campuses and additional locations will merge or close.
- e. Change management is difficult at times within higher education. Leaders are balancing historical programs and practices that will not fit easily into the dynamic future of higher education. It is advisable that change management training be offered as part of institutional professional development programs. Best practices for innovation and change will be helpful to share as case

studies within higher education. Change also needs to include guardrails for allowing some failures as long as students are not harmed.

- f. If colleges are to survive and thrive, the concept of “not in my back yard” will have to be shut down because it serves as the enemy of positive change.

6. Exponential Growth of Short-Term Credentials and New Providers

- a. States and workforce development organizations are moving rapidly to advance skills-based hiring. While off to slow start, Learning Employment Records (LERs) and evolving big data systems offer resources that will facilitate this movement. Other platforms assure records are increasingly comprehensive and provide the learner a standardized, clear platform to present who they are and what they have learned or practiced to employers and education/training providers. These advancements will have the capacity to become the new “transcript” and facilitate easier transfer for users.
- b. In addition to industry-specific skill needs, durable skills (traditionally called “soft” skills) are increasingly important in the changing environment for employment. There is an increasing expectation that postsecondary institutions will design for and assess these skill areas. Examples of these important skills include critical thinking, communication, team building, and collaboration. Their importance remains, and they are not firewalled from the focus on workforce development.
- c. Ultimately the degree retains validity, although the short-term certificate market poses some competitive challenges. These do not have to be mutually exclusively pathways.
- d. Several alternative credential and training organizations with market-driven business models and sophisticated technology are rapidly gaining traction. These organizations partner with colleges, universities, systems, states, employers, consumers and other educational providers to offer curricula and credentials.
- e. Well-known online companies are likely to continue to offer courses and programs via distance learning. Expect instances where behemoth corporations, with extensive consumer home delivery experience, choose to move strategically into the online short-term credential space.

- f. Stackable credentials, leading to degree attainment and credit mobility, are important for colleges and universities. However, this emerging trend is based on the notion of credit for seat time versus skills outcomes. Legislators are proposing extension of Pell grants to new credentials for the workforce (Short-Term Pell); if passed, adoption will shine a bright light on the need to review limitations of the “credit hour” as a measurement of student engagement.
- g. Quality assurance guidelines will become increasingly important to help navigate the growing credential marketplace.

7. Politicization of Higher Education, Increased External Interventions

- a. More than ever, elected officials are weighing in on higher education. New regulations impact a variety of areas, including accreditation.
- b. Some states have implemented mandatory elimination of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs, including funding dedicated to support them. Other states are considering similar legislation.
- c. Higher education proposals are part of the platform of individuals running for the presidential election. It is important for college leaders to be informed on all such opinions.
- d. As the pathway to the college or university presidency changes over time, more elected officials and others outside of higher education are being chosen for leadership positions.
- e. Congressional investigations of institutions are increasing, currently related to the war in the Middle East, anti-Semitism, balancing opposing perspectives, and related issues. Expect more Congressional investigations of higher education.
- f. Both elected officials and institutions are dealing with critical issues, some of which have bi-partisan support, while others are divided. This leaves the colleges and universities in the challenging position of meeting the needs of all stakeholders.
- g. Debates continue about the rights of states and the federal government, and differences are not easily resolved. Higher education may be caught in the middle.
- h. Advocacy continues to be important for colleges and universities; balancing the myriad of opinions calls for very skilled leaders.

8. Speaking Out: Conflicting Voices, Civility and Safety on Campuses

- a. The rules of engagement on academic freedom and free speech are facing serious challenges.
- b. New policies are being developed that aim to produce some solutions, although the approaches are highly polarized.
- c. A select number of states are implementing new regulations for public institutions with guardrails around academic freedom.
- d. Colleges can expect continued interest as a variety of stakeholders opine about academic freedom and free speech. Higher education's centuries-old value that "everyone has a voice," is on questionably fragile ground.
- e. Students will need support and guidance to understand both the value and impact of their actions under the umbrella of free speech.
- f. Safety and security are important considerations related to demonstrations on campuses.
- g. Presidents who have hesitated on taking firm public stands on campus security related to polarizing issues are finding their positions at risk. It is very difficult for all stakeholders to agree on a single approach that everyone will accept as appropriate, and this trend has the potential to make some leaders more tepid in their public positioning. Students need help to feel safe on campuses.
- h. College and university leaders are seeking increased consultation from public relations experts and legal advisors regarding practices, policies and positioning related to polarizing current events.
- i. Despite the decision-making and reputational challenges which would keep any leader up at night, concerns about safety are dominant and necessary. Leaders must be well-prepared to handle these challenges as the public face for their colleges.
- j. Strong enforceable safety plans will continue to be needed, as will methods to protect students and others from physical danger, bias, bullying, or incivility.

9. Mental Health Challenges Continue – Impact and Oversight

- a. The effect of mental health on the well-being of students continues to be a major concern of institutions of higher education.
- b. The stress of the current higher education and societal environments impact the faculty, staff and administrators.
- c. Support services for students and other campus personnel continue to be of critical need on campuses.
- d. The remnants of the pandemic combined with increased generational stress continues.
- e. Funding will be needed to assure sufficient support infrastructures and experts.
- f. When safety is shattered through major incidents, the impacted campuses need immediate and long-term solutions to heal. Advanced planning is rising and will need to be continuously reviewed and updated.

10. Talent Management and Succession Planning: Colleges Need to Be Ready for Turnover at All Levels

- a. As the population ages, colleges are experiencing a wave of retirements.
- b. Burnout exacerbates increased turnover.
- c. Institutions with financial challenges often cut or suspend professional development funding for employees. The results could be painful later; an investment to grow talent often yields a high return.
- d. Leaders of colleges and boards are asking for detailed succession plans across the organization. In cases where people leave with little notice, not having such plans can be very costly.
- e. New skills sets will be needed at all levels over time. Institutions are looking for ways to prepare for an unknown future. As an example, if Artificial Intelligence becomes a focus on the campus, ask if training should be siloed or more decentralized.
- f. Job announcements are different than in the past; many are written to identify skills sets and not just titles as evidence of experience.
- g. Colleges are searching for new talent from within and outside of the organizations, and often the competition is strong, while the pool of candidates may not be deep.

- h.** Combining positions due to budget reductions is common, although burnout can escalate for those who remain.
- i.** Human Resource and talent management staff recognize that despite its many challenges, working for a college or university offers an exceptional opportunity for growing professionally within a dynamic and very important industry with a global reach.

11. The Important Role of Leadership: Challenges and Continuity

- a.** This is likely the most difficult time to be a college president. This trend will continue for a long time, and it threatens the leadership pipeline.
- b.** Turnover of leadership at colleges is more frequent and impacts the sense of stability of their institutions.
- c.** Turnover of provosts, vice presidents and deans also disrupts the sense of continuity within postsecondary institutions. In difficult times, consistency of all leadership matters.
- d.** Professional development for current and future leaders is critical. The learning pathway to leadership has no dead end. Funding needs to be allotted to support continuing education and training.
- e.** Due to the challenges facing higher education, the candidate pool for leadership positions might decrease or at the very least, be less prepared for the jobs for which they are applying.
- f.** Trustees of college boards also need ongoing training and assessments. These volunteer positions are becoming increasingly complex, requiring both support and self-reflection.
- g.** Unstable governing boards impact the stability and reputation of their institutions.
- h.** Presidents, other leaders and boards need and deserve support from their college community. In particular, boards need to support their leaders who are facing daunting challenges.
- i.** The rewards of volunteer leadership on governing boards can far outweigh the challenges if members keep an eye on the institution's mission, vision and strategic directions – finding ways to be proactive, responsive, transparent, and empathetic to all constituents.

12. Accreditation and the Influence of the Triad

- a.** The relationship of the Triad (the states, the federal government, and accreditors) is increasingly important in these challenging times for higher education. Their coordination, transparency and shared problem-solving is needed to support and collectively oversee the quality assurance and compliance of institutions. Each is also obligated to find ways to be adaptive in the face of the many advances and innovations emerging.
- b.** Accreditors, which previously were low on the national radar, are now facing increased public scrutiny and interest.
- c.** There are times that the guiding principles, requirements, vision and opinions of each member of the Triad are in conflict. Coordination is critical.
- d.** Accreditors frequently receive mixed signals from states and the federal government about new or proposed legislation. It is not their role to adjudicate or mediate differences when conflicting mandates are passed in states that are different from those of the federal government, although they must determine how to adapt accordingly to each.
- e.** As voluntary membership organizations, accreditors will need to advocate for balancing diverse viewpoints on behalf of their members.
- f.** Competition among accreditors is on the rise since passage of the July 2020 regulations allowing former regional accreditors (now “institutional”) to expand their scope.
- g.** New accreditors will join the marketplace, and some experienced accreditors will add new business models to remain relevant.
- h.** HLC will need to respond to current and future trends, while honoring its mission that prioritizes a focus on students.

