

2023 Trends



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Each year, HLC provides a list of current trends that impact the higher education ecosystem.

The trends are released at our Annual Conference, with a theme this year of “Learn, Lead, Luminate.” These trends reflect patterns that are exemplified in books, special reports, articles, podcasts, conferences, and other sources. This year’s trends include a mix of hope and challenges, and they can be used for deep discussions on campuses, thereby empowering the important question, “What does this mean for us?” While these trends are not prioritized, it might be useful for readers to create their own rankings and prioritizations for the next few years.

1. Student Mental Health

- a. Post-pandemic stress is exacerbating the emotional well-being of students.
- b. Colleges and universities are increasingly focused on identifying the signs that suggest mental health is affecting their learners.
- c. There remains a need for more campus resources to meet the demands.
- d. Higher education is witnessing a growing need for trauma-informed leaders.
- e. Faculty capacity is stretched as students turn to them as “first responders.”
- f. The mental health of all employees is equally omnipresent and can ultimately impact students.

2. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)

- a. Access to education and training on these issues is important for both students and employees.
- b. Higher education is often at the forefront of recognizing the advantages of a culturally diverse student body and faculty, aligned with the institution’s mission.
- c. Inclusion and belonging are important to the student’s need to feel part of a community, and a welcoming education experience.
- d. Higher education is seeing increased Hispanic student enrollments. At the same time, some students of color remain disadvantaged in the postsecondary education system.
- e. The Generation Z students are having a growing impact on racial and ethnic diversity in higher education.

3. The Changing Landscape of Credentials

- a. The growth of non-degree credentials is exponential and an increasing part of the educational offerings to students.
- b. Stackable certificates leading to degrees are productive options for learners, documenting skills and completion along the way.
- c. Certificates, certifications, and licensure often lead to immediate and measurable workforce placements and promotion.
- d. Third-Party provider partnerships with colleges and universities are increasing, requiring guidance and scrutiny to be productive and rewarding for students.
- e. Stand-alone, non-higher education providers are growing at a rate which will have an impact on post-secondary enrollments, and a potential shorter path to employment.
- f. Implementation of short-term Pell grants are on the horizon, which would link new credentials to federal dollars.

4. Finance

- a. Enrollment shifts have an impact on budgets, with some schools normalizing post-Covid and others still struggling.
- b. State support for higher education is moving in a positive direction.
- c. Tuition costs and freezes are more prevalent, addressing the need for an affordable Return on Investment (ROI) for students.
- d. Adult learners are entering higher education in numbers surpassing traditional-age students.
- e. Streaming classes and other technology costs are placing pressures on institutions to upgrade infrastructures and software, while colleges consider the balance of buildings versus alternative modalities.

5. Teaching and Learning

- a. Skills-based learning is a popular pathway for students, offering the workforce qualified job applicants and employees. The use of Competency-Based Education is a major component in this transition.

- b. Assessment of outcomes is critical and remains challenging as many courses and programs strive to measure student learning. The capacity to build supportive data systems varies by institutional type and finances.
- c. Major shifts to hybrid and online offerings are uprooting the traditions of “on campus” learning, with students and faculty taking increased agency in decisions.
- d. Training of faculty on new methods (i.e., online, Artificial Intelligence) is critical in redefining the concepts of teaching, learning, and research.
- e. The role and integration of experiential learning are increasing as well as expected from learners.

6. Transfer Roadblocks

- a. Sector bias continues to impact students’ ability to transfer, while more institutions are moving toward greater collaboration and transparency.
- b. Access options are derailed without well-outlined and coordinated articulation agreements.
- c. Without increased transferability and transparency, students are more likely to end up with increased debt.
- d. The need to repeat courses is a burden to students who deserve to have integrity and clarity in their educational journey.
- e. A well-implemented Learner Record would help students consistently demonstrate their lifetime portfolio of learning.

7. Leadership

- a. The mental health challenges go beyond students and impact current and future leaders. Resilience is becoming a necessary skill for those in charge. Self-care is also very important.
- b. The rapid departure from jobs in higher education will leave a vacuum of qualified applicants.
- c. More non-traditional candidates are filling leadership roles.
- d. Leaders are balancing great rewards and burnout.

8. Outcomes

- a. Predictive analytics, interventions, and institutional capacity vary across higher education and continue to be key indicators in public opinions on the ROI of a college degree.
- b. The debate continues on ways to measure student success and the data required to provide accurate insights.
- c. The importance of recognizing institutional differences, missions and “context” remains at the center of the debate on student outcomes.
- d. Integration of the “student intent” variable is still more conceptual than measurable in higher education, which may reflect the limitations of reliable outcomes.
- e. Public pressures for increased accountability continue with a focus on debt, job placement, graduation rates and other outcomes for success.

9. The Value of Higher Education

- a. There is a growing fluctuation of public perceptions regarding ROI of a college degree vs. other credentials.
- b. Cost and relevancy of certain programs are placing some institutions in the middle of state and national debates.
- c. Students’ need for “purpose” is critical in the value higher education provides.
- d. Institutions struggle to balance planning for an unknown future of higher learning and serving immediate needs. The pandemic highlighted the importance of crisis management and planning for significant disruptions.
- e. The exit of well-known institutions from the rankings begs the question of the value of such measurements for decision-making.

10. Online Program Managers (OPMs)

- a. The growth of OPMs poses significant opportunities for partnerships with higher education.
- b. The importance of vetting providers for quality assurance is growing.
- c. While there are many success stories, some partnerships could become a race to increased enrollments and possibly lower the quality offered to students.
- d. New partnerships are providing increased access to systems for online learning at traditional higher education institutions.
- e. Institutions need to have guidance in developing contractual arrangements and accountability.
- f. The growth in OPMs will have continued impacts on state and federal regulations.

11. Consumer Awareness

- a. There are mounting concerns about transparency and integrity provided to learners.
- b. This includes concerns about predatory recruiting, misleading students, and the importance of Borrower’s Defense regulations.
- c. Consumer awareness is often affiliated with one sector but applies to all sectors of post-secondary education.
- d. The increased need for student awareness and asking the right questions can stimulate accrediting agencies to provide some solutions. (Resource: <https://studentguide.hlcommission.org>)

12. Innovation

- a. The need for agility and speed to market is critical for innovative transformations in higher education. This has to be balanced with quality assurance and continuous input from users.
- b. Colleges and universities can benefit from safe spaces for innovation and freedom to “fail” without accreditation, state, or federal penalties.
- c. The importance of measurements of success along the way defines which innovations will prosper.
- d. Colleges and universities continue to develop outstanding and productive innovations for learners.

13. Partnerships, Mergers, Affiliations and Acquisitions

- a. Partnerships in all areas of higher education grew in the past academic year.
- b. Conversions from For-Profit to Non-Profit institutions can be productive, while also attracting significant public debate on the integrity of these transactions.
- c. New partnerships are offering lifelines to struggling institutions, although many will close in the coming years.

14. Workforce Needs

- a. Real-time learning and immediate benefits to employers are increasingly the focus of both institutions and Third-Party providers.
- b. The importance of apprenticeships, internships, and other experiential learning is becoming a dominating factor in the future of learning opportunities.

15. The Shrinking Focus on Liberal Arts

- a. The importance of critical thinking, communication, and people skills continues to be questioned, while employers are simultaneously noting the importance in the hiring decisions. The public sometimes suggests workforce training should supplant the liberal arts. Debates continue in ways that suggest it is not an “either/or” pathway; it is both.
- b. Institutions are reviewing and closing some liberal arts programs that held historical prominence on campuses. Financial support is diminishing and sometimes shifting to more workforce-oriented curricula.
- c. In any case, the importance of a liberal arts education remains a lens to the development of a person as a whole.

16. Broken Traditions

- a. The tenure debate continues with increased scrutiny and influence from elected officials.
- b. The question of who owns the curriculum exemplifies the rise of external influences on post-secondary education.

- c. Political pressures are rising in new and substantive ways.
- d. Faculty are feeling challenged and discouraged, while others support the changes, reflecting the political polarization of the country and on campuses.

17. Career Centers’ Shortcomings and Opportunities

- a. Students need a culture of lifelong career support, starting with appropriate services on campuses. The time of “one office in isolation” is over.
- b. Digital career counseling reflects the need to adapt to new modalities of hybrid and online programs. Students and alumni seek career support remotely for practicality, immediacy, and convenience.
- c. Smaller or under-funded institutions may lack the capacity to offer sufficient career guidance, leaving students feeling disengaged during and after their college experience.
- d. Partnerships have the possibility of enhancing career guidance beyond institutions of higher education.

18. Evolving Workplace Practices and Challenges

- a. The move to more hybrid work environments has dramatically changed higher education.
- b. Many have returned to the office on one hand, and others work remotely or in a hybrid environment. This shift impacts capital decisions about buildings.
- c. Higher education, like the rest of the world is experiencing the Great Resignation, the Great Disengagement, the Great Retirement and Quiet Quitting, in finding qualified applicants for jobs post-Covid.
- d. All these trends suggest the need for educating, mentoring, coaching, and providing support for current and future faculty, staff, and leaders in higher education.

Trends are good predictors for the future, although they are always evolving. As Peter Drucker stated, **“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”**

Consider creating your own rankings and prioritizations:

- ___ Student Mental Health
- ___ Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)
- ___ The Changing Landscape of Credentials
- ___ Finance
- ___ Teaching and Learning
- ___ Transfer Roadblocks
- ___ Leadership
- ___ Outcomes
- ___ The Value of Higher Education
- ___ Online Program Managers (OPMs)
- ___ Consumer Awareness
- ___ Innovation
- ___ Partnerships, Mergers, Affiliations and Acquisitions
- ___ Workforce Needs
- ___ The Shrinking Focus on Liberal Arts
- ___ Broken Traditions
- ___ Career Centers' Shortcomings and Opportunities
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