



2020

HIGHER EDUCATION TRENDS

The Higher Learning Commission offers the following as key trends in higher education, with a focus on considering each and its impact on accreditation. As part of ongoing strategic planning, members are surveyed, and listening sessions are held at the HLC Annual Conference for input into the most pressing trends for our colleges and universities.



Accreditation: Vision For Its Role In The Higher Education Ecosystem

- Massive changes in higher education create an opportunity for HLC to re-examine its mission, vision and goals.
- HLC is committed to engaging its membership and other key stakeholders in identifying strategic directions to maximize accreditation's impact on student success and protection.
- As part of the current strategic plan, *Beyond the Horizon/VISTA*, several recommendations for HLC are under consideration.
- Increased pressure from outside the organization impacts the future directions of HLC's work, i.e., new federal regulations and Congressional legislation.
- There is a growing demand for accreditors to hold institutions more accountable in assuring both the value of accreditation and higher education.
- As a member of the Triad, HLC must continue to be exemplary in its relationship with states.
- The dynamic between serving as a member organization and a regulatory body is shifting. Members want more focus on quality assurance than compliance with federal relations.
- HLC holds value to members as a priority.
- HLC's members are encouraging the organization to take a major role in thought leadership for higher education.
- HLC is committed to encouraging and enabling innovation and quality assurance, which are sometimes perceived as mutually exclusive.



Academic And Student Services

- Quality assurance is central to academic and student services.
- Global citizenship remains a high priority for many colleges and universities.
- International student enrollment is declining due to concerns about immigration rules and laws.
- Online programs are growing at a fast pace across institutions.
- Mega-universities are becoming dominant providers in online learning.
- Decreasing enrollment of 18-22-year-old students continues to make an exponential impact. Demographics are changing the direction of American higher education.
- Adult learners are entering higher education with needs that are different from younger learners. The demographic shift impacts both academic and student services, as well as faculty expertise in andragogy.
- Finding strong faculty with appropriate qualifications is most difficult in rural communities.
- Higher education is experiencing an increase of micro-credentials and certificates, within and outside traditional institutional offerings.
- Veterans continue to seek higher learning, requiring appropriate academic and student support.
- Tenure and shared governance are under increased scrutiny within and outside of higher education.
- With an increasing emphasis on jobs, the liberal arts are at risk of being marginalized at some institutions, despite research demonstrating that graduates with a well-rounded general education succeed at greater rates across their lifetimes.
- There remains an increased need and demand for innovation in higher education.



Engagement

Outreach

- K-12 counselors are some of the most influential voices when a student selects a college, requiring strong partnerships with higher education.
- All students require transparency from institutions and increased consumer protection.
- All parts of the Triad, including specialized and programmatic accreditors, need to coordinate outreach and transparency.
- Accreditation is often an unknown variable as students choose institutions; new communication pathways are needed to provide them clear and timely information.

Civic Engagement

- There is greater involvement in civic engagement on campuses in election years.
- There remains a misunderstanding about what civic engagement means.

- Students deserve the opportunity for active civic engagement and free speech on campus; removing or marginalizing them threatens the foundation of America's higher education system.

Advocacy

- Higher education institutions, states and accreditors are increasingly involved in advocacy.
- External influences are shifting local, state and institutional controls over higher education.
- There remains an increasing imperative for educating and advising decision-makers on regulations and legislation.
- States and the federal government seek input from accreditors. Therefore, HLC accepts its role in advocacy and thought leadership as a priority with support and encouragement from members.



Equity

- All students are entitled to access to higher education.
- An increasing number in students of color are entering higher education.
- A continued commitment to helping all students reach their completion goal is an imperative for the equity agenda.
- Holding institutions accountable for equity and access must be mission-based.
- Alternative pathways to learning are changing the options for access. New credentials and certificates are being offered to meet a variety of student needs.
- Many states use performance-based funding; this requires a focus on disaggregation of data.
- College readiness is threatened by a weakened PK-12 system in some areas.
- There is an increased public consciousness of equity and inclusion issues; however, barriers remain.
- Accreditors have a role in advancing the equity and access agenda.



Financial Pressures

- Students often enter college without financial literacy.
- Decreased enrollments are threatening many institutions, in part due to the demographic shift. Small rural colleges are the most threatened due to dependence on tuition. The enrollment decrease, however, impacts nearly all colleges and universities.
- New business models are needed to survive and thrive.
- Mergers and affiliations are on the rise. This includes shared services, partnerships, affiliations and closings.
- While state funding has increased, most institutions are still impacted by the decline in support since the 2008 recession.

Governance

- Serving as a college or university trustee is increasingly complex, mirroring the overall shifts in higher education.
- Shared governance is no longer a guarantee in higher education. It is threatened both internally and from outside pressures. The same applies to tenure.
- Governing boards require extensive training to meet the duties of care, loyalty and obedience as fiduciaries.
- Embattled boards and leadership can be distracted from focusing on students first.
- Effective boards have a key role in quality assurance.



Leadership

- The turnover rate of college presidents remains high. Over the past several years, the length of their tenure is declining.
- Presidents, CEOs and other leaders hold positions that are very different and more complex than in the past. As a result, not only is turnover more frequent, but a qualified pool of candidates is threatened.
- Frequent turnover in leadership leaves the public and accreditors more concerned about the strength of an institution.
- CEOs are often “drinking out of a firehose,” without needed down time to refuel, be contemplative, create strategic visions or release stress. The result can be heightened burnout.
- As university budgets shrink, professional development, especially for leadership development, is unlikely to be a funding priority.
- Increased professional development for leaders is critical to their success.
- CEOs and governing boards face increased crises (natural disasters, scandals, image issues, etc.), which require professional development through crisis management training.
- Pending new regulations and legislative actions at the state and federal level impact leadership readiness for their implementation.
- Strong communications skills with social and emotional intelligence are integral to leadership success.
- HLC’s members strongly support its strategic direction of providing thought leadership to all stakeholders. This includes leadership for higher education, not solely accreditation.



Outcomes

- There is a collective priority to improve outcomes, particularly, but not exclusively, student success. Numerous resources are needed – financial and intellectual – all working towards a common goal.
- There is not common agreement on outcome methods and measures, much less how to go about improving them and what are the higher education stakeholders’ respective roles are in that improvement. “Outcomes” means different things to different people and organizations.
- The timing is ripe to develop a collaborative framework for building a reliable data infrastructure and benchmarks. This is the time for advocating and influencing policy and public discourse, improving transparency, and promoting equity and increased accountability.
- Any changes in policies and regulations or decisions require consideration of the implications for the ever-changing, inter-dependent higher education ecosystem.
- Institutional leaders and accreditors are actively engaged in advocacy about outcomes; measures of accountability need to include recognition of varying missions in higher education.
- One size does not fit all institutions when developing benchmarks.
- Data-informed decision-making will be central to accountability.



Students

HLC conducted a survey of students from its member institutions in 2019. Over 30,000 responses were received. Results show:

- Students note increased mental health issues and stress.
- While the majority of students are seeking degree completion, many do not meet their goal.
- Students note the importance of the transferability of their classes, including dual enrollment.
- Students want their “learner intent” to be important in measuring student success. Not all students are seeking a degree or certificate.
- Students state that they have attended, or will attend, more than one institution.
- Several noted the critical importance of support from faculty and academic/student services.
- Most respondents take ownership and responsibility for their own success; others expect more from their institutions in order to succeed.
- Creating relationships and networks is important to students.
- Some respondents felt they were misled before and throughout their college experience.
- Student debt after college is a major concern.
- Students want safety and security on campus.
- Equity, access, diversity and inclusion are important.
- Students rarely mention college and university leadership; their lifeline is through the faculty.
- Students did not stress full-time faculty versus adjuncts in their responses; they are mostly concerned about having qualified and caring faculty.



Technology

- Increased security is needed to protect institutional data.
- A rise in Artificial Intelligence is present in higher education institutions.
- Blockchain data has the potential to impact campus data as well as the development of a lifelong learner profile. Privacy and adherence to student protection will be important.
- Academic and student services can be strengthened with reliable technology applications.
- Technology is impacting the business models of higher education at an exponential rate.



Value

- The purpose and value of accreditation is under fire. There is increased pressure for accreditors to hold institutions more accountable, resulting in stronger colleges and universities with a heightened Return on Investment (ROI) to learners.
- A national debate is focused on the value of higher education as a public good (improves society) versus a personal/private good (employment). This results in external pressure for accreditors to create data-specific metrics for evaluation, including job placement, graduation rates, student debt, etc.
- A public perception remains that degrees are not awarded in majors that are relevant for marketability.
- Recent scandals in admissions lead to questioning the credibility of the enrollment management process.
- Predatory institutions reflect poorly on their own integrity, but also overall consumer protection in higher education.
- Tensions exist between supporting students' needs and goals (intent) while meeting current accountability measures (graduation/employment).

The Higher Learning Commission expresses deep appreciation to our members for input on these trends and the many contributors participating in our strategic planning efforts.

