

Trends 2025

The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new.

attributed to Socrates

The Higher Learning Commission Trends 2025 are likely the most challenging we have ever compiled. They are candid and present the key issues of the past year, with an effort to challenge readers to ask a key question of each: “How will our institution respond?” The trends are built on the most frequently discussed issues and events that impact higher education in the United States, and they will be used to build HLC’s strategic directions in our next plan, **North Star**. We build this list with a knowledge that the future is unknown, which can be scary in some ways, but exciting in others. The exemplary work being done at our member institutions is remarkable — in teaching, research and public service. It is our sincere hope that anyone reviewing this list will use it for important discussions on your campuses or other related organizations. Prioritize what matters most to you according to your mission, vision and values. Then ask, “What can we do next for our students?”

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1. Change Leadership

- a. The rate of change in higher education requires leaders who are well-prepared to assess institutional readiness to adapt and implement short- and long-term strategic solutions.
- b. Training for change management and leadership across the organization will strengthen buy-in and foster sustainable pathways to success.
- c. Creating a culture of change positions leaders to empower others to develop proactive continuous improvement.
- d. There are great opportunities for higher education to reclaim that shifting narrative by implementing effective change and building on successful teaching, research and other historical advances.

2. Leadership Turnover: Opportunities and Threats

- a. With shortened tenures for college and university chief executive officers (CEOs), the pipeline for talent becomes increasingly important each year.
- b. The portfolio for leadership is changing from the traditional academic background to a much broader scope, including business leaders, lawyers, elected officials and candidates from other industries.
- c. There is a growing concern about presidential readiness for an increasingly multi-faceted, difficult job. The voice of critics from within and outside of higher education is taking a toll on leaders, even those with a long history and strong reputation in higher education.

- d. A new president may feel very isolated and benefit from participation in individual or group coaching. The same can be true of those with other cabinet-level positions. Trustees need to support their leaders as the positions become exponentially more difficult and, frankly, lonely.
- e. New methods will be needed in hiring practices to ensure future leaders have the appropriate skills, i.e., emotional intelligence, political savvy, financial acumen, vision, tolerance for ambiguity, and the ability to motivate others to action.

3. Teaching, Learning and Faculty

- a. The growth and improvements in artificial intelligence (AI) will continue to provide opportunities and some threats for both students and faculty.
- b. While the historical ownership of the curriculum rests with the faculty, many others are weighing in or influencing what takes place in the classroom.
- c. The impact of the pandemic on students' readiness is clearly a result of the time lost in the K-12 systems.
- d. The focus on workforce does not need to replace general education or liberal arts, each to be defined by the mission of the institution and its student populations.
- e. There is growing concern about the time to complete a degree program and a concomitant interest in reduced-credit bachelor's degrees.
- f. Skeptics are increasingly questioning the value of graduate education; it will be important to ensure outcomes are matched with student expectations and the needs of the relevant workforce.
- g. Many states are growing dual enrollment programs to help students earn college credit while in high school.
- h. The disruptions in higher education impact faculty and staff, who continue to hold a very central role in students' lives.

4. Financial Stability and Sustainability

- a. The demographic cliff is here, and the result is a decrease in traditional-age students entering college.
- b. The future of funding at the federal level is unknown, and institutional leadership must navigate unpredictable budgets, while balancing the commitment to the public good of higher education.
- c. State funding is stable, but unknown for future years. Any traditional tasks from other parts of the Triad that are transferred to states will come with a cost.

- d. Students as consumers are making choices outside of traditional higher education for postsecondary learning.
- e. The increase of remote learning and work, coupled with advanced technology, will lead to different campus infrastructures for the future.
- f. More institutions will merge or close. New institutions could open with alternative curricula.

5. Crisis Management, Disaster Recovery and Preparation

- a. Reputational issues continue for higher education, requiring more crisis readiness, informed by counsel from both communications experts and lawyers. No historical time has seen more public pressure on the outcomes of institutions and the performance of their leaders, including both CEOs and trustees.
- b. Conflicts on campus regarding speech and expression are common and reflect historical rights and norms. With more scrutiny on particular issues, leaders need to be transparent, prepared, and anticipate pushback.
- c. Weather disasters have taken a toll on many campuses across the country due to hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, fires and other natural disasters. Even the most prepared campuses suffered surprises and extensive damage. It may take years to recover.
- d. Lessons learned from these unfortunate and devastating disasters can lead to new ways to plan for future incidents for all colleges. Funding will be needed for preparation and recovery.

6. More Complex Legal Issues

- a. As the challenges facing higher education become more complex, there will be an increase in the need for in-house counsel and for consultation with legal firms at colleges and universities.
- b. With increased competition, more antitrust issues could occur, and legal counsel will be needed to assure compliance.
- c. With any new presidential administration, there are directives to institutions that might be confusing or, in some cases, contradictory to existing practices. Legal counsel is often needed for clarification and guidance.
- d. A combined expertise in policy and legal issues will help both elected officials and college leaders interpret the law and legislation. Institutions need to ensure proper support is available and funded in their budgets.

7. Mental Health Issues Continue

- a. Stress continues to be a factor nationally, affecting both students and employees.
- b. Students need appropriate support to ensure all mental health issues are addressed, within and external to campus personnel.
- c. Policies should be updated regularly to address the rising mental health issues for students.
- d. Programs should be made available for employees, such as Employee Assistance Programs, in recognition of the societal and institutional pressures they face.
- e. Appropriate training is needed for all faculty and staff, including resident advisors and academic advisors, to help identify when a student needs assistance.
- f. The increased mental health challenges can impact the completion and success rates of students.

8. The New Landscape of Higher Education

- a. New business models are being implemented at colleges and universities, with a wave of innovation within higher education.
- b. There is a divide between and among campuses related to financial capacity to develop and test new innovations in teaching and learning, as well as research.
- c. AI is permeating all aspects of higher education, from enrollment management to the classroom. Many institutions are involved in research advancing AI applications.
- d. There is an increasing rise in short-term credentials, stand-alone or stackable to degrees, creating new opportunities for learning and competition. Several associations and organizations are deeply engaged in the short-term credential space (CredLens, Jobs for the Future/EQOS, Credential As You Go, Credential Engine, etc.). HLC's Credential Lab is underway with counsel from three prominent groups of stakeholders. hlcommission.org/credential-lab
- e. If short-term or workforce Pell is approved, colleges and universities will be able to access new resources for these credential-based certificates and programs.
- f. The public and employers are focusing on skills-based learning.

9. Value of Higher Ed: Demonstrating Return on Investment

- a. The rising focus on outcomes and accountability is prominent at the state, federal and institutional levels.
- b. Public spending and college affordability are being questioned, leading to a need for more accountability. Some suggest that institutions should be held accountable for unpaid student debts.
- c. The questioning of the need for a degree versus a short-term credential or certificate is ongoing. This questioning challenges higher education's return on investment (ROI) but also speaks to the importance of workforce partnerships and measurable outcomes.
- d. Bipartisan concerns exist about higher education in general. Key areas include transparency, outcomes, costs, debt, job placement, etc.
- e. It will be important for higher education to build strong programs and public statements about the value of college to learners, with a measurable increase in students' quality of life.

10. Past Is No Longer Prologue

- a. Long-held traditions are changing across all of higher education. Many of these shifts are due to adaptations to the evolving learner needs and the marketplace. Others are driven by new state and federal regulations.
- b. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Several states have initiated or passed legislation and other mandates that have the potential to affect many existing programs. The future is unknown as to how these changes will impact institutions and their students. Historical practices will be impacted, but no one knows for certain the outcome.
- c. Governance Structures: Boards and leadership changes demonstrate a mix of restructuring, mergers, more centralization of systems, different backgrounds for leadership roles, etc. The forces behind these changes are sometimes financial; others are creative ways to maximize talent and resources. There is public pushback at times, but one thing is certain: change is going to continue.
- d. Shared Governance: This traditional value and practice of higher education faces challenges at the local, state and federal levels. There are arguments on both sides as to the advantages and disadvantages of consensus

building and participation by faculty in decision making. As above, while it is a gradual change in historical practices, it is nonetheless an ongoing discussion.

- e. Tenure: The opportunity to earn the right of tenure is a sacrosanct benefit of higher education. External and internal pressure to examine the pros and cons continues, and the future of tenure is in question.

11. Systemic Reform: A New Political Environment

- a. The Impact of the Israel-Hamas War: The war in the Middle East brought immeasurable impacts to campuses across the United States. The situation resulted in ongoing conflicts that are proving very difficult for presidents to manage. New policies are being put in place on some campuses, while campus leaders and state influencers are backtracking former policies and practices. New federal policies will likely be put in place to further weigh in on the chasms that are dividing campuses, frightening students, and creating a passionate and difficult situation.
- b. Governance: Higher education is experiencing an increase of state influence and a federal perspective that accreditors should not be reviewing governance issues at all. Many examples exist of conflicts that arise when political appointments are placed in leadership roles, often without campus input. In a time of political uncertainty and need for higher education to provide a measurable return on investment, trustees are looking for very savvy and experienced leaders, who may be former elected officials.
- c. Triad Disparities: Accreditors can be caught in the middle when the states have different standards for quality assurance or operations than accreditors, and the federal government is often also going down a different path.
- d. Growing Influence of Think Tanks: Many groups — partisan in most cases — are providing reports, analytics and recommendations for higher education. Higher education has the choice to accept, reject or ignore such reports. Another option is to learn from them and reclaim the narrative.
- e. Civil Rights and Equity Under Fire: Many areas are experiencing new regulations related to Title IX, a wide range of civil rights issues, and overall challenges to long-held traditions. This trend ties back to the need for more legal counsel, as there will be challenges at all levels. Some of these changes are partisan, but many

have been discussed for years. Higher education will benefit from its own analysis of the future and best next steps for balancing often competing demands and, at times, values.

12. Accreditation

- a. In these dynamic times of higher education, accreditors will find themselves right in the middle of the many public debates and changes facing colleges and universities.
- b. Accreditors will face challenges about their standards and may be asked to add or eliminate certain requirements.
- c. New accreditors will enter the field, expanding the competition that was put in place with the July 2020 regulatory changes.
- d. The changing standards of institutional accreditors is enabling more innovation, focused oversight, transparency and quality assurance of colleges and universities.
- e. HLC must aim to partner with member institutions to navigate the rapid changes taking place in higher education.
- f. Accreditation can be leveraged for positive change at an institution, both internally and with the public.
- g. The past is no longer prologue with accreditation either — the public image does not always reflect the significant continuous improvement of those agencies recognized by the federal government.
- h. As expected of accredited institutions, HLC and all accreditors must be committed to transparency and focusing on the most important stakeholder in all the discussions taking place: students.

How do you prioritize these trends?

- ___ **Change Leadership**
- ___ **Leadership Turnover: Opportunities and Threats**
- ___ **Teaching, Learning and Faculty**
- ___ **Financial Stability and Sustainability**
- ___ **Crisis Management, Disaster Recovery and Preparation**
- ___ **More Complex Legal Issues**
- ___ **Mental Health Issues Continue**
- ___ **The New Landscape of Higher Education**
- ___ **Value of Higher Ed: Demonstrating Return on Investment**
- ___ **Past Is No Longer Prologue**
- ___ **Systemic Reform: A New Political Environment**
- ___ **Accreditation**
