

Trends 2026

Each year the Higher Learning Commission presents a list of current trends at our spring annual conference. With appreciation to the higher education and national press, the many excellent books written in the past year and lessons learned from HLC's near 1,000 members, Trends 2026 reflects the sea changes taking place in higher education.

The significant and fast-paced shifts are more complicated than we might have predicted over past decades. Yet with each challenge comes an opportunity. Realizing that change is inevitable, the trends can inform readers about the signals and triggers that translate to needed reforms. The American higher education system leads the world; this inflection point in time demands agility and collaboration to meet the moment.

The trends are not prioritized. We encourage you to use them to identify the key strategic directions of your institutions and organizations, on behalf of students and the communities served. Ask how you, individually or as part of a team, will contribute to the future of higher education.

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I

Who Is in Charge of Higher Education? Governance and Increased Political Influence

Public perceptions of higher education have shifted dramatically over time. States and the federal government are introducing new oversight requirements. Institutions are dealing with governance issues in the changing environment, and several factors are impacting the future of higher education.

- a.** Governance autonomy at the nation's colleges and universities is challenged in the face of increased scrutiny over higher education.
- b.** The role of the states and the federal government in oversight and support of higher education is increasing exponentially.
- c.** A new landscape impacting colleges and universities is driven by all branches of government — legislative, judicial and executive.
- d.** Higher education is impacted by unreliable funding sources and continuity of past practices, i.e., federal research grants, state support and student aid.
- e.** Increased court challenges lead to unsettled decision making.
- f.** Colleges and universities are facing some reputation challenges on a broad level along with heightened questioning of institutional leadership.
- g.** DEI and academic freedom are changing, including culture wars, civil discourse and a laser focus on ideological influences.
- h.** Leaders are prioritizing maintaining commitment to institutional missions and values while finding a middle ground to compliance.
- i.** Political influences may lead to transfer problems in the future among institutions or states.
- j.** Many of these trends have been seen in the past decades.
- k.** The current state will lead to increased advocacy from institutions, accreditors and other stakeholders.

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Student Success and Outcomes: Validating the ROI of Programs and Institutions

The important concerns about the return on investment (ROI) of a college degree correlate with a variety of issues.

- a. There is a need for consistent, reliable and trustworthy data to measure student outcomes.
- b. Many states have advanced data systems and measurements.
- c. To date, there is no universal interoperability of data systems across all states. Upgraded data at the federal level could also aid in measuring outcomes.
- d. Expanded metrics are needed to validate evidence of student success. Many institutions do not have the sophisticated and costly systems needed to gather this data on their own.
- e. Learning records will assist in documenting student skills and outcomes across a lifetime.
- f. New artificial intelligence (AI) applications will be developed to provide coordinated, accurate data.
- g. Trust and public confidence improvements are aligned with evidence and documentation through data analytics.
- h. Student outcomes at the programmatic level will be a focal point within the new federal regulations.
- i. The dynamic debates about which metrics matter most will continue.

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Competition and Choices: The Dynamic Landscape of Credentials

The “2025 Counting Credentials Report” by the Credential Engine states, “This report identifies 1,850,034 unique credentials in seven distinct credential categories, 134,491 providers of these credentials, with total annual expenditures of \$2.34 trillion across the full ecosystem.” The implications for higher education are wide-ranging.

- a. A broader view of credentials is redefining the access and completion agenda, broadened to a growing expansion of credential pathways.
- b. Many more choices for learners are available through a variety of credentials, including stackable options leading to a degree.
- c. However, not everyone needs a degree to meet their learning goals. Student intent varies and can lead to more personalized and adapted instruction.
- d. Time to market and the speed of delivery can be met through several credentialing options.
- e. Workforce readiness, job placements and promotion are fueling the need for more choices.
- f. Independent offerings are available outside of higher education, although quality assurance is inconsistent.
- g. Institutions are using a new paradigm in moving non-credit courses to credit. Additionally, institutions are converting some credit-based programs to non-credit certificates.
- h. The result will lead to an inflection point for student-focused innovation.
- i. Workforce Pell, while built on a high bar for disbursement of funding, will broaden support for short-term credentials.
- j. Overall, the degree remains the best path to a better quality of life, although the percentage of support is declining over time.

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The Reality of Finances: Program Cuts, Mergers, Consolidations and Closings

Colleges and universities continue to face fluctuations in funding. Many issues impact this current state of finances.

- a. The decrease in federal grants will impact institutions, with several challenged in the courts.
- b. Institutions with large endowments are likely to fill some of the gaps.
- c. Enrollment declines from the demographic cliff continue.
- d. Tuition, affordability and use of waivers are under scrutiny. In some cases, waivers have escalated too high to sustain.
- e. State and federal support for higher education is not guaranteed at the levels of the past.
- f. Increased closings, mergers and acquisitions are prominent.
- g. Institutional closures are more common in the face of financial challenges. In some cases, new affiliations between institutions prevent imminent closure.
- h. Deferred maintenance may become marginalized during trying financial times.
- i. Downsizing facilities often reflect the changes after the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtual learn and work environment.
- j. New technologies and innovations are emerging, often with high costs. Not all sectors of higher education can meet the demands.
- k. New research funding models will emerge.
- l. The changing oversight of funding for athletics and players will lead to new business models on campuses.
- m. Risk management oversight will be needed for many issues, including sustainability, costs, data security, crisis communications, etc.
- n. Legal and advocacy expenses are growing due to the need for increased lobbying on behalf of higher education.

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Teaching and Learning

The teaching and learning environment holds the potential to be transformed dramatically, driven by new trends.

- a. Personalized and adaptive learning will help learners on their educational journey.
- b. The increase in skills-based learning will enable more alignment with workplace needs.
- c. Program relevance to market needs is a major focus for consumers.
- d. New forms of teaching and learning with AI will impact both students and faculty. Debates will continue on the opportunities and concerns of AI integration.
- e. Shared governance, a long-held value of higher education, is being questioned along with other key protections such as tenure. Some states are requiring post-tenure review.
- f. Political pressure on the curriculum is rising with more intervention in course and program content.
- g. Student support service needs are growing.
- h. Reduced-credit degrees, dual enrollment and other new pathways to higher learning are increasing.
- i. Graduate programs are being questioned, and federal GradPlus loans are at risk.
- j. College readiness concerns continue.
- k. Faculty pressures are leading to attrition and movement to new positions.

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Harnessing the Strengths of Artificial Intelligence

AI is changing exponentially in many ways, moving rapidly to new and more reliable applications. Higher education institutions have entered this new environment and will continue. AI will improve and grow more rapidly than most colleges and universities will be able to absorb.

- a. Institutions are developing emerging governance policies for responsible use of AI. Board members are engaged and need to ensure evolving applications are reviewed through the policy lens.
- b. Opportunities and limitations are being analyzed at all levels.
- c. Admissions work is being redefined through the use of AI for recruiting, advising and enrollment. Staff time will become available to provide higher level advisement and coaching with students, using data provided by AI. The opportunity costs of enrollment management will be greatly improved.
- d. Student support services, assessment of learning, and other uses can create efficiencies for institutions.
- e. The role of faculty may change dramatically, with proper policies in place to allow them to focus their expertise on new ways to utilize AI to enhance the student experience. Oversight of academic integrity will shift with AI. Faculty can help institutions develop and implement responsible use policies.
- f. Opportunities for accreditation efficiencies will be enhanced with AI.
- g. AI dashboards may provide important analytics of data from a variety of systems that are not currently interoperable.
- h. AI literacy will be beneficial to all employees and students.

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Strategic Partnerships

Colleges and universities are using a variety of partnerships to strengthen their institutions, create efficiencies and create new sustainable business models. Several patterns are emerging.

- a. New models are in place for public/private opportunities, i.e., shared teaching and learning, operations, and student support.
- b. External providers are offering programs through contractual arrangements with institutions.
- c. Revenue sharing can be beneficial to all partners and the students served. Institutions will need legal guidance to ensure that the arrangements are fair and balanced.
- d. Consortia are increasing as institutions work collaboratively to offer courses and programs.
- e. Students are earning credit from a variety of institutions versus the traditional model of attending only one college or university. Learning records will help document their work.
- f. Companies from outside of higher education are offering membership opportunities for long-term partnerships.
- g. Sharing of staff is increasing to ease the costs for any single institution.
- h. Critical partnerships are being formed and strengthened with the communities the institutions serve.
- i. Workforce partnerships through internships, mentoring, coaching, and apprenticeships often lead to employment, which can be documented as metrics for student success.
- j. Collaborative funding through grants and foundation support enables institutions to meet goals that might otherwise be difficult to realize individually.
- k. Strategic partnerships have the capacity to create critical new innovations and research.
- l. Physical plant sharing and outsourcing are more common in higher education when institutions need new business models for sustainability.
- m. Inviting influential partners for advisory councils, boards of trustees and other stakeholder groups will continue to increase expertise and networking.

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Global Impact and International Students

The current trends in higher education have an impact beyond the United States. When colleges and universities go through significant changes, the ripple effect is felt across the globe.

- a. The reputation, rankings and influence of American higher education help lift the boat across the world. The interchange with other countries combines to provide the kind of services and learning needed in the age of technology, innovation and change.
- b. However, there are potential threats to the population of international students if they do not feel welcome and have to pay large sums for visas.
- c. It is important to maintain these students for their expertise, commitment and ability to conduct transformative research.
- d. Global learning helps all students see beyond their own frameworks.
- e. Institutions of all types are concerned about the financial impact if international students choose other countries for higher learning.
- f. The current trend will likely shift over time with increased public recognition of the importance of these students.
- g. While the U.S. remains first in the world, some institutional rankings have declined slightly. There is increased competition from China. It will be important to follow and control the outcomes of these rankings.

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Navigating Change and Chaos: Burnout, Mental Health and Security

The mental health issues on campuses remain a strong indicator of rising stress and related issues.

- a. Student anxiety, depression and isolation remain across all sectors of higher education.
- b. Overall mental health issues impact not only students, but faculty, staff and leaders, including trustees.
- c. Burnout is observable in both the classroom and in employees, with an increased awareness of the need for strong support services.
- d. The COVID-19 pandemic created a challenge for college readiness, perceived as the “lost years” in the K-12 system. Long-term effects have led to trauma and PTSD for some students.
- e. Loneliness and social isolation impact students of all backgrounds. It is important to identify the need for help and hire professionals to address these problems.
- f. The rapid changes in higher education, growing over the past decade or more, have resulted in more frequent turnover of leadership. The job is more stressful than in the past. This will affect the pipeline for replacements.
- g. Turnover is present at all levels, and “time in a job” is decreasing across the board. This requires a laser focus on talent management.
- h. Students are facing fatigue, insecurity and workload pressures.
- i. Students’ ability to voice their opinions, deal with protests, the presence of ICE or Border Patrol, and other areas is distracting and confusing.
- j. Leaders seek to provide resilience on campus, while also facing their own wellness needs. It is a rewarding yet challenging job to serve as a CEO with increased demands and public scrutiny.
- k. There are many experts and services available to institutions to meet mental health challenges.

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Talent Management and Turnover

Several factors impact overall talent management for colleges and universities. They reflect what many call the current existential crisis in higher education.

- a. Recognition that higher education creates a strong nation, and the burden to serve as contributor with competing demands.
- b. Leaders can provide a caring and supportive environment to increase retention.
- c. The speed of AI development requires literacy and experienced employees.
- d. Many new leaders come from outside of higher education, bringing new experiences and readiness for change.
- e. Additional lawyers, lobbyists and staff with advocacy expertise will be needed to meet the moment.
- f. Traditional practices to protect long-term employment are being questioned.
- g. Many people who work in higher education accept their careers as a “calling” and are committed to a positive future for their institutions and students.
- h. As more stakeholders weigh in on higher education, hiring managers will be positioned to identify important retention and attraction strategies.

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Change Management: Resistance or Adaptation

Change management and leadership are growing needs in higher education. The system is at an inflection point, and it will be important to be flexible, adapt and accept reforms needed to sustain and lead for the future.

- a. New business models are being developed to build and sustain colleges and universities.
- b. AI literacy will help institutions move beyond the current trend, where many are trying to catch up with the students and workforce.
- c. Coalitions of the “ready” will be early adopters and shape the future.
- d. It is time to solve the transfer issue and work more collaboratively between and among institutions.
- e. Communication campaigns will be important to position the many positive impacts of higher learning.
- f. Governance models will be revisited.
- g. Resistance to change is normal; leaders need to set the example and encourage agility.
- h. Higher education has historically provided a very satisfying and rewarding career. Adaptive change will ensure that this continues.
- i. At all times, it is important to stay true to the mission of each college and university. The diversity of institutional types and learners is a core strength of the American higher education system.
- j. All students deserve the changes that will meet their needs across a lifetime.

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Accreditation

More than ever, accreditation is on the national radar. State and federal regulations, executive orders, and increased competition continue to push for significant change.

- a. The core business of accreditation remains quality assurance. Metrics to ensure that quality vary by each commission.
- b. Accreditors are accused of using inputs instead of outputs, and most are quickly adapting to outcomes as a priority.
- c. New accreditors will seek recognition by the U.S. Department of Education in the coming years.
- d. States are weighing in on existing and potential new accreditors, some directing public institutions to change.
- e. New specialized accreditors will focus on workforce and credentials that are shorter and not necessarily resulting in a degree.
- f. Pressure is growing on some programmatic/specialized accreditors.
- g. The current structure of accreditation includes all sectors; a new accreditor's members will be narrowed to public systems. This could lead to more sector segregation within and between accreditors.
- h. Both states and the federal government have expressed concern about ideological bias within accreditors.
- i. The relationship within the Triad of the federal government, states and accreditors will become increasingly important.
- j. New competition brings a commitment to following antitrust laws and regulations.
- k. Accreditors will set up new business models, and some may choose to break the gatekeeper ties to federal financial aid.
- l. With the shifting environment, there could be mergers of some accrediting commissions.
- m. The boards of accrediting commissions are including strong representation from business as an intentional strategy.
- n. Recent Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grants from the federal government support the growth of new accreditors.
- o. The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions changed its name to "Council of Recognized Accrediting Commissions" to reflect the new national scope in memberships, following regulations that became effective in 2020.
- p. Similar to accreditors' member institutions, each commission needs to be prepared to be agile and respond to changing market needs.
- q. Negotiated rulemaking will be held in April and May 2026, introducing many new proposals for accreditation.

How do you prioritize these trends?

___ Governance and Political Influence

___ Student Success and Outcomes

___ Competition and Choices

___ Finances

___ Teaching and Learning

___ Artificial Intelligence

___ Strategic Partnerships

___ Global Impact

___ Mental Health and Security

___ Talent Management

___ Change Management

___ Accreditation