THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

FREE REPORT

What Higher Ed Will Look Like in 10 YEARS

Fundamental change is coming quickly

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Higher education in the United States has reached a crossroads. Colleges buffeted by economic changes, political pressures, and dwindling public confidence must respond quickly while also playing the long game: They must plan now for future demographic shifts, rapid technological change, and an uncertain labor market. How will their decisions shape not only their own institutions but the entire higher-education ecosystem? What will it look like in 10 years?

The Chronicle's recent report, *Higher Education in 2035*, explores how colleges can prepare for the challenges to come in the decade ahead. In September, we're convening a three-day summit to examine how today's trends will shape higher education's future. **Join us September 10-12 for the Chronicle Festival: The Road Ahead to 2035.**

To help you prepare for this year's event, we've compiled three excerpts from the *Higher Education in 2035* report: Goldie Blumenstyk, a *Chronicle* senior writer, takes stock of whether colleges are prepared to navigate a period of fundamental change. Hollins Robbins examines the role of AI. And Thomas Fisher considers how hybrid education will reshape the classroom and campus.

Order a copy of the full report to read their unabridged essays, plus perspectives from other leading experts. **Visit chronicle.com/CHRONFEST24 to save 25 percent on your purchase.**

With the full report, you'll discover more deeply informed hypotheses about higher education's future, including analyses of the nature and scope of research and teaching, the makeup of students and the ways they will be taught, and the ways institutions will be led.

Some visions are optimistic. Others warn that urgent steps must be taken if higher education is to live up to its promise. Not everyone agrees about what that promise entails. Should colleges be more focused on preparing tomorrow's work force or on acting as a bulwark of democracy? Must they choose? No matter the answer, the consensus is that business as usual is not an option.

Fundamental Change Is Coming Quickly to Higher Ed

Will the sector respond in time?

BY GOLDIE BLUMENSTYK

The self-styled education disruptors of the 2000s, with their slick apps and scalable MOOCs, didn't manage to radically change American higher education. But demographic shifts just might. In fact, in many parts of the country, they already have.

The changes that are hitting — as the enrollment pipeline of traditional-age students starts to shrink and other forces take hold — could alter higher ed more than anything I've seen in my 35-plus years as a journalist covering colleges. Collectively these changes are not only likely to further shrink the sector. They could also reshape the population that goes to college, how those students are taught, and which departments and majors thrive or die — upheavals that in turn will reverberate through the professoriate and the coffers of institutions across the country. This is not a drill.

Actually, the upheavals have already begun; they're just not so easy to see across the entire sector. That is, until you step back to look. That's what the contributors to this report do, in essays that examine the implications of these changes and predict — sometimes darkly, sometimes with optimism — what the higher-education landscape will look like in 2035.

For me, and for many of the people now leading at colleges, it already looks like new territory. While the sector has been continually evolving during my time as a *Chronicle* reporter, for the most part, the higher ed I've observed — and in which today's leaders have learned the ropes — has been expansionist, putting up new buildings, developing new programs, and adding new services as if that were the natural course of things. But the next decade and beyond will require different approaches and mind-sets.

"Higher ed is now a mature industry," says Dennis Jones, president emeritus at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a nonprofit consultancy where he's worked with states and colleges for more than 50 years. "We haven't adapted very well to how to manage in that environment."

The idea that an enterprise with roots dating to 1636 is only now entering its "mature" stage might seem illogical, but if you consider higher-ed history, I think Jones is onto something. However you define the modern era of higher ed — post-World War II? post-internet? post-Covid? — his point is that with the trends now converging on colleges, a fundamental shift is coming.

This notion of students as customers and higher ed as just another industry in flux does not sit well with some. Many of us still think of it as something bigger and more important than that. At its best, it is, living up to the ideal that education isn't a product to be delivered but rather a process of engagement and discovery. So I recognize the pitfalls of trying to draw an analogy between the convulsions coming to higher ed and the way that, say, changes in consumers' retail behavior have altered the fates of shopping malls across the country.

But even industries that consider themselves a calling, like my own, need to acknowledge that when an underlying economic pillar shifts, there's no avoiding the effects. In 2006, American newspapers collected nearly $50 billion in advertising revenue, according to the Pew Research Center. By 2022, that figure had fallen to $10 billion. The staggering decline in the number of newspapers and in working journalists during that same period is no coincidence.

Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, is a nationally known expert on the business of higher education. She has won multiple awards from the Education Writers Association and contributed to *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. A frequent speaker at conferences and guest on public-radio shows and C-SPAN, she is the author of the fortnightly newsletter The Edge and *The Washington Post* best-selling book *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

The unique complexities of each industry aside, what advertising revenue is to the newspapers, tuition revenue from enrollment is to colleges.

Nationally, enrollment has been on a downward slide for about a decade. Undergraduate enrollment hit its peak at 18.1 million in 2010-11; today it's closer to 15 million. (This secular downward trend seems stronger than the fall of 2023's post-Covid rebound.) Growth in post-baccalaureate enrollment ticked up a little during that same period, to about 3.2 million, but not nearly by enough to make up for the undergraduate decline.

And now, the next big jolt is fast approaching. As the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education has been predicting for years, nationally the population of high-school graduates is expected to peak at just over 3.9 million in 2025. After that, those projected numbers start to fall every year for at least a dozen years. By 2035, the overall high-school-to-college pipeline will be 10 percent smaller.

The effects of this demographic cliff will be uneven; a couple of states are even projected to see their numbers of high-school graduates increase. And certainly many institutions will have the strategies and wherewithal to manage their way through, although as WICHE's own data guru, Peace Bransberger, puts it, that might feel as steady as "going downhill on gravel with roller skates." Others, including the couple hundred institutions that Jones calls the "nothing's gonna touch us" cadre, may not feel it at all.

But for many institutions the impact of this shrinking funnel could be profound — even existential — especially when you add in factors like the falling rate of college going among high-school graduates and other young adults. Recent polling by the ECMC Group and Vice Media, for example, found that between February 2020 and January 2023, the percentage of high-school students considering a four-year degree fell from 66 percent to 52 percent. "They're not so sure it's for them," says Courtney Brown, a vice president at the Lumina Foundation who oversees its research on educational attainment.

Students' increasing preference for larger colleges, a trend the consulting firm EAB calls market concentration, could also leave many institutions out on a limb.

Because of these trends, EAB predicts that by 2030, 449 colleges will face at least a 25-percent decline in first-time, first-year enrollment, with 182 of those facing a decline of more than 50 percent. By 2035, the comparable numbers are 524 and 227. (They're even worse for 2040.)

Those estimates did factor in how Covid-era learning losses in elementary and secondary schools could affect the pool of high-school graduates headed to college, but not how those numbers might be further diminished by the surging rates of chronic absenteeism many schools are now experiencing. (The rate of absenteeism has doubled since 2018.)

To be sure, colleges can look beyond high schools for enrollment. And many already have developed outreach and degree programs specifically aimed at older students, particularly the more than 40 million Americans who have attended college but never earned a degree. But winning those students back is often harder than many realize, and as Lumina's Brown notes, too many colleges are still "horrible" at serving adults. (My own reporting bears that out.)

> "Higher ed is now a mature industry. We haven't adapted very well to how to manage in that environment."

The Chronicle's own survey data on public perceptions of higher ed found similar skepticism: 57 percent of respondents with some college but no degree said they didn't plan to go back because they didn't need college or already had a job they liked. At the same time, many of the older students who do decide to start or return to college are looking for courses that will advance their careers. They want a major "that's quickly going to translate to the labor market," says Brown.

CUTS AND CLOSURES

Of course predictions of financial stress are just that. (And maybe the "precision" of those EAB estimates of enrollment shortfalls are themselves enough to raise doubt.) But there's plenty of evidence that the impact of the coming demographic cliff is already all too real — so much so that it's hard to even keep up with the litany of institutions that have recently closed or announced plans to merge, or those that have cut academic programs and slashed professorial ranks largely because of low enrollment. The 2022-23 academic year saw the closure of Cardinal Stritch University, in Wisconsin; Cazenovia College, in upstate New York; Finlandia College, in Michigan; Holy Names University, in California; and Iowa Wesleyan University, in Mount Pleasant. At the end of this academic year, the 2,600-student College of St. Rose, in Albany, N.Y., will join them. And that's just a sampling.

Meanwhile many more colleges that aren't closing are reducing or altering their program offerings — often at the expense of fields like the humanities and the arts. As dispiriting as the environment is for the affected communities and people involved — and to the overall fabric of American higher education — it packs a double whammy for certain populations and for society as a whole. Many of the small private colleges and rural public campuses that have closed, or are now shifting their mix of academic offerings toward majors that appear more aligned with work-force needs, serve a disproportionately high number of low-income and minority students. In other words, as Catharine (Cappy) Bond Hill of the consultancy Ithaka S+R has noted, at the very time that the nation needs to raise educational attainment, the institutions serving the most underrepresented students are disappearing or shifting course.

For many of these low-income and place-bound rural students, picking up and moving just isn't an option when colleges shut down programs or close altogether, says Jones. Theoretically, online education is increasingly an option, but research shows that fewer than half of the students whose colleges close go on to finish their degree. And even fast-growing states like Utah, for one, have rural pockets where low enrollments at some institutions could result in more limited offerings — closing off access,

Jones says, "to a portion of the population that's already hurting."

A SHIFTING CURRICULUM

It's hard to know how many colleges will actually close as a result of declines in enrollment. The impact on curricular offerings may be easier to predict, based on recent history. Beginning around the same time as the enrollment slide, undergraduates' interest in the humanities has been falling, while health sciences, engineering, and natural sciences are growing. For majors like English, history, foreign languages, and religion, the peak was 2012, says Robert B. Townsend, who tracks these trends for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. "It's been downhill ever since."

to assume that the trends in that direction will only intensify as the rest of the country catches up.

Vermont is a case in point. It has been cutting majors (some that were duplicative across institutions) in Spanish, music, and fine arts, while adding capacity for fields like nursing and respiratory therapy. Nolan Atkins, provost of the newly created Vermont State University, characterizes this shift as "tailoring the program array to meet the work-force needs of the state of Vermont."

Vermont's moves are a realistic reaction to the political and economic reality. After all, there's no valor in keeping curricula stagnant while society evolves. Offering majors in fields that respond directly to what today's students want to learn is likewise a responsive and responsible step.

At the very time that the nation needs to raise educational attainment, the institutions serving students most underrepresented in higher ed are disappearing or shifting course.

At many colleges, professors who teach in the humanities are already fearful for their own future and for the fate of their disciplines. That came through especially in the spring of 2023 during the academy's listening tour with 75 department chairs around the country. "They were worried about a faculty member retiring or moving to another institution," Townsend says, because they recognized there was no guarantee that the departing professor would be replaced. (Their fear may be well-grounded: According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, more than one in 10 humanities faculty positions were lost between 2015 and 2020, a more pronounced drop than experienced by any other field, although their numbers are still substantially higher than they were in 2000.)

The shifting mix of student interest is especially pronounced in several of the states that have already begun to feel the effects of the enrollment cliff, so it's probably safe

But it's also worth recognizing how each move like this adds up. At some point, "it really changes the nature of the institution," says Mary L. Churchill, an associate dean and professor of the practice at Boston University's Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, an entity that itself survived an enrollment crisis by merging with BU in 2018. Four-year institutions aren't the only ones struggling with this transition. Even at community colleges that have long emphasized a focus on general education, growing demand for work-force-oriented courses is leaving many longtime instructors uneasy about the new direction their institutions are taking. "This is a culture shift," says John B. King, chancellor of the State University of New York.

A world that is becoming more and more interdependent and complex needs graduates who can engage thoughtfully in science,

art, and history. Yet many colleges are now finding themselves increasingly nudged toward a more vocationalized future.

The shifts will also change the makeup of the professoriate writ large. And as Churchill laments, as colleges respond to shifting student demand, the decisions could have lasting impact: "We will be cutting some programs," she says, "that will be very hard to reverse."

And the more each institution changes, the more the sector as a whole shifts its axis.

WHAT WILL SET SURVIVORS APART

Facing down these challenges will take a lot of fortitude. On top of that, political attacks are unlikely to die down and — absent something big — public trust will likely remain fragile. College and university leaders trying to prepare for the imminent future do not have the wind at their backs.

Still, as I was often reminded while researching this essay, the story of American higher education is a story of evolution. The enterprise I write about today looks and operates a lot differently from the one I first began reporting on in 1988. So even though I argue that between now and 2035 the changes will come faster than many of us have ever experienced, and in an environment with more complications and limitations, that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of strategies for responding. I heard several of those in my reporting.

The most successful institutions will be those that:

- Improve retention, since every student who stays is a student colleges don't need to replace.
- Expand on strategies that involve outreach to students early in their high-school years, an approach many colleges have begun to adopt in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing race-conscious admissions.
- Develop academic collaborations with institutions that complement their mission, even — and maybe especially — beyond local geographies. Collaboration, says Marjorie Hass, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, "is really existential, not just to share costs but to leverage knowledge."
- Institute or streamline procedures for accepting transfer credits and assessing prior-learning credit, to better accommodate older and returning students. Whenever feasible, consider their work and life needs too when scheduling courses.
- Build on that third leg of college's raison d'être by reimagining themselves as "public-service institutions" that receive revenue for advising local governments, nonprofits, and companies. Colleges could do that, says Jones, "and use that as a learning experience for the students."

The best leaders will be those who:

- Cultivate the skills for change-management; change will be the only constant.
- Recognize the importance of communicating, early and often.
- Authentically embrace the principles and practices of shared governance and engage productively with unions.
- Shift their mind-sets from competition to collaboration. Sounds simple, but as Jones notes, historically, "that's not in the DNA of higher ed."

Most of all, administrators and faculty members need to get real. Maybe the challenges outlined here, and in the essays that follow, won't have as powerful an impact as we expect. But the underlying facts that drive them aren't imaginary.

As Staisloff, the consultant, puts it, there are already too many corners of society "where people seem to be willfully running away from data that doesn't fit their way of thinking." Higher ed shouldn't be one of them.

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AI Will Play a Surveillance Role in Higher Ed

That may be a good thing.

BY HOLLIS ROBBINS

Top universities are at the top not because the faculty members and students are smarter but rather because the administrators are smarter. Top research universities in 2035 will have succeeded in utilizing the powers of AI in the smartest ways. Art, music, and film schools that have embraced AI in their curriculum will also thrive. Institutions that have not adapted to AI will struggle or close. Colleges and universities are already facing a public skeptical of what appears to be higher ed's political and social-justice mission, and those that prioritize a social rather than educational mission may also dwindle in number. Universities whose leaders seize the opportunity to redeem and reclaim higher ed as the stronghold of verifiable knowledge production will succeed.

Artificial intelligence is already changing higher ed in multiple and contradictory ways. The new AI large language model technologies (ChatGPT, Anthropic) were largely developed outside the university setting. Recognizing the need to catch up, universities are scrambling to invest in AI research, building AI systems and products on one part of campus even as leaders on another worry about the validity of contributions by AI chatbots to the work of faculty members, staff, and students. The threats of AI misinformation and hallucination are far more of a problem for higher ed than they are for industry, which means universities must guard as well as innovate.

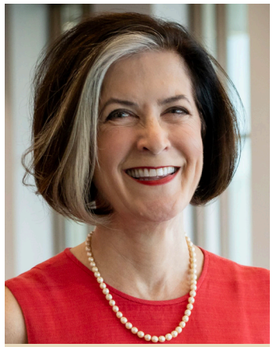
By 2035, thriving universities will maintain walled gardens of uncontaminated information, a guarded vault of verified facts and current knowledge tended by professors and researchers for the benefit of students and the university community. Universities will realize that they are the holders and producers of two increasingly valuable assets: reliable scholarship that AI researchers are willing to pay for and reliable information for the public. Universities will produce and sell content for public consumption, filling the void left by the collapse of global news organizations and strong regional newspapers.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND TEACHING

University researchers are already lagging behind industry and independent research groups in using AI technology. In a decade there will be increased incentives for top academic scientists to leave universities for AI-driven research laboratories.

Accordingly, two key roles for administrators at research universities in 2035 will be to stay on top of AI knowledge production and capabilities outside of academe and to ensure the integrity of existing stores of knowledge, current scholarship, and teaching in an era when information is increasingly unreliable. This role will mean developing new layers of scrutiny of faculty publications for veracity, originality, reliability, and replicability. Publications will need to be screened before entering libraries and joining the archive of established scholarship. This will be an enormous task, sifting scholarly wheat from chaff, performed by scholars with AI assistance.

As a result of careful screening, a great deal of existing academic research and scholarship will be marked with an asterisk, indicating that it is unverifiable, unreliable, and of little significance. Currently libraries do not make distinctions about scholarly worth. AI will allow and perhaps force these distinctions.



Hollis Robbins

is dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Utah. She is a specialist in 19th-century American literature and co-director of the Black Periodical Literature Project at Harvard University.

The fundamental reorganization of university library holdings into reliable and unreliable works may also result in new disciplines, subdisciplines, or in some cases disciplinary homogenization. Currently there is a great deal of quantitative behavioral scholarship that could fall under economics, psychology, communication, sociology, or epidemiology, for example. These historical categories may disappear as AI proposes new groupings without disciplinary bias.

A not-insignificant percentage of faculty members will lose their current positions at research universities when their work does not survive rigorous vetting and scrutiny.

Beyond ensuring the integrity of research and teaching, administrators at large institutions (or consortiums of smaller ones) will also draw on AI to better understand what is growing in their own walled garden. AI can scan and absorb all papers, publications, and works in progress across a given institution and offer up a clear and detailed picture of the range of research produced by its faculty and graduate students.

AI will give administrators a clearer picture of the overlap and potential for collaboration among labs and faculty members, and will allow for more efficient institutional support for faculty research. Administrators will be able to perceive new clusters and nurture them. Those who work alone, outside the gravitational pull of past or future groupings, will be at risk of increased invisibility or precarity. In those cases, administrators will also have a role in assessing the viability of research that may be truly innovative — like mRNA technology — or a dead end.

Teaching is another area in which AI will likely play a surveillance role. Administrators will also be responsible for ensuring the integrity and veracity of information taught to students. Curricula will be carefully maintained, updated, and decontaminated. Access to this uncontaminated information (rather than the unsound and unreliable information available in the wider world) is what students will be paying for. The value proposition of a college education will be far easier to see in 2035 than it is at present.

While AI technology has been touted as producing new teaching tools like chatbot tutors, the primary teaching paradigm at top research universities in 2035 may very well be old fashioned seminars where small groups of students discuss knowledge production and acceleration with top scholars, whether in physics, history, literature, geography, astronomy, or other fields. The key questions will be: How do we know what we know? What remains unknown? What needs seeking out?

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The 'Phygital' Future: What Campuses Will Look Like

BY THOMAS FISHER

What could — or should — campuses be like in 2035? We don't know the answer to that question now, but we can see signs of what's to come, propelled in part by the Covid-19 pandemic. We frequently forget the impact that global pandemics have on higher education. The mid-19th-century cholera pandemic in America helped prompt the establishment of land-grant universities to meet the demand for more graduates in the "mechanical arts" of engineering, able to design the water infrastructure needed to avoid future outbreaks of the disease. Likewise, the 1918 influenza pandemic helped propel the establishment of the American Association of Junior Colleges, in 1920, in response to the growing desire among many students to learn closer to home. They wanted to avoid living in crowded conditions, where exposure to the virus had killed so many college-age youth.

Those previous pandemics helped push American higher education to become more accessible, both economically and geographically, to a wider range of students. We should assume that the same will happen in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, as colleges and universities face growing skepticism about the value of a college degree, falling enrollments on some campuses and in some disciplines, and rising pressures to respond to the changing economic circumstances of students and their families. For many institutions, increasing accessibility to a greater number and diversity of students may become not just an ethically responsible move but also an essential survival strategy, to which campuses must respond.

THE 'PHYGITAL' CAMPUS

One trend accelerated by the pandemic was distance learning, enabled by digital-communications technology. Most campuses have returned to face-to-face classes, to varying degrees, since the end of the pandemic, but some hybrid learning, involving a mix of in-person and remote instruction — what some call "phygital" education — will probably become a permanent part of higher education. That phygital future has drawbacks in terms of its effect on students' sense of community and even their mental health. But it also offers real advantages to many students. In my classes, students can choose whether to come in-person to my classroom or attend via Zoom, and one-half to two-thirds of them opt to learn remotely on any given day. Many tell me that that flexibility has made their lives much easier, enabling them to juggle busy home lives and work schedules.

The phygital form of learning may alter not only the classroom but also the campus. Hybrid higher education is likely to need less instructional space. My 90-student class needs a space for only about 30 students: those who regularly attend in person. And the nature of classrooms and lecture halls will probably change, with many fewer fixed desks and seats, and many more monitors to allow students, regardless of their physical location, to interact more easily with one another. At the same time, spaces not designed for instruction, such as dorm rooms and coffee shops, may increasingly serve remote learners as educational spaces. To do that, they will need better lighting and acoustics.

Pandemics tend to overturn a lot of previous assumptions, and Covid-19 was no different. While planners typically divide campuses into clusters of residential, instructional, research, and recreational areas, those categories may no longer reflect the reality of how students learn, faculty members teach, and staff members work. Living spaces have become an extension of the classroom; home offices, an extension of people's workplaces; and almost anywhere with a good internet connection, an extension of the library. Because of such fluid uses, future campuses may need less dedicated space for particular activities and more flexible space that is multi-functional and multi-channel, accommodating different endeavors over the course of a day. That approach will not only use space more fully but also increase access by more people to a greater range of educational activities.

Thomas Fisher, who will be speaking at ChronFest, is a professor in the College of Design at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and director of the Minnesota Design Center.

THE MULTI-GENERATIONAL CAMPUS

The future campus may also need to become both multi-generational and multi-modal. One of my university's rural campuses has the only child-care facility in town and a relatively new dormitory, mothballed because of a decline in enrollments, that could become one of the only elderly housing facilities in town as well. That older age group could not only help absorb the excess housing, fill unfilled classes, and support campus services, but also aid caregivers in the child-care center and mentor students, who might want to learn from elders' life experiences and career paths.

> Future campuses may need less dedicated space for particular activities and more flexible space that is multi-functional and multi-channel.

Such multi-generational colleges might become the campus equivalent of "8 to 80" cities, an effort in urban design and planning to create cities that accommodate the needs not just of working-age people but also children, 8 and younger, and elders, 80 and older. The 8-to-80 idea means involving youth as well as retirees in the design and decision-making process, which has led cities to create more parks and open space, safer sidewalks and streets, better seating and lighting, and more places for conversation and play. While campuses have many of those same physical features, higher education remains generationally segregated, with most students within a fairly narrow age range and with very few 8- or 80-year-olds around. Future campuses may need to include multiple generations to fill underused space, tapping the aspirations of the young and the wisdom of the old.

Such campuses might consist of more family housing as well as elderly housing in dormitories and apartments that students

working remotely no longer need. Campuses with excess space could also provide educational spaces for every age group, from child care and elementary and secondary schools to continuing education and adult day-care centers. That age diversity could not only ensure a fuller use of existing facilities but also create a richer educational community, with people contributing their knowledge according to their ability and learning from others according to their need.

THE RESILIENT CAMPUS

Future campuses could offer greater access and diversity not only to students but also to other species. On my campus, native grasses have begun to replace many turfgrass lawns, wild turkeys now graze across our quadrangles, and eagles have re-established their nests along the river. Meanwhile, canopies of solar panels now shade perimeter parking lots, wind turbines power one of our rural campuses, and biowaste from the food industry fuels one of our power plants. Such things may seem like small steps toward a more resilient future, but they add up and, over time, show how campuses, once monocultural energy hogs, can find new ways to operate and cooperate with nature.

Thinking of campuses as natural systems may lead to even more significant changes in the future. The word "campus" comes from the Latin word for "field," and in the United States at least, we have often taken that literally, building campuses on greenfield sites, away from cities or apart from their commercial centers, and organizing them around weed-free, grassy lawns. Whatever the benefits of such physical separation, it has had largely negative ecological effects, requiring a lot of parking, power, and pesticides. A more ecological approach to campuses might mean letting their landscapes become habitats for a diversity of plant and animal species, and encouraging students, faculty, and staff to seek out whatever habitat best supports their work — whether in the many underutilized spaces that often exist on campus or in the increasing amount of former commercial and industrial space off campus that the pandemic has emptied.

The future campus, in other words, may need to become more a part of the environment in which it sits, whether in a rural or suburban landscape in need of greater ecological diversity and connectivity, or in an urban setting in need of more human activity and energy. The history of American campuses mostly set apart from their surroundings reflected an ideal that has become both antiquated and self-defeating. While the locations and layouts of campuses are unlikely to change much by 2035, their character and content could differ considerably from what they are today.

How we get from our current campuses to what they could be remains both a challenge and an opportunity. Colleges, like the commercial centers of most cities, face a future in which digital bits will continue to replace, to varying degrees, what happens in bricks and mortar. That will present problems in the short term, as higher education deals with a lot of underutilized space that sits empty more of the time. But over the longer term — by 2035 and beyond — campuses could become what they became after previous pandemics: places that increase access, promote diversity, embrace difference, and respond to change in innovative ways. With that past in mind, I think that is a future worth working toward.

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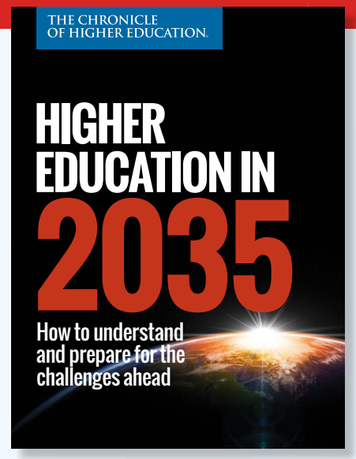
How to understand and prepare for the challenges ahead

"Colleges are forced to consider: What can and should higher education be?"



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