

Chapter 13

Seeking Equity, Quality, and Purpose as Higher Education Transforms: Liberal Arts Colleges Respond

Debra Humphreys

Lumina Foundation, USA

Mary Dana Hinton

Hollins University, USA

ABSTRACT

Taking account of the dramatic shifts in the make-up and educational and social needs of today's college students, the authors explore how to steer future reforms in ways that will advance goals related to equity and educational quality. The chapter begins with an overview of the major trends in who today's students are, what we now know about teaching and learning that advances equitable student success, and the changing global economy and workplace. Building on that analysis, the chapter explores the strengths and weaknesses of unbundling and proposes a potential new avenue for reform in liberal arts colleges making use of both unbundling and "re-bundling" of educational experiences proven to advance quality and equity.

In the face of unprecedented challenges and opportunities to higher education institutions of all sorts—some that were emerging prior to the pandemic, others directly associated with it—we seek to explore the question of how to respond effectively from two angles. First, we will articulate the broad trends and challenges that all institutions of higher education are confronting. Then, because we believe that few authors have delved deeply into what these trends mean particularly for liberal arts colleges and because the existential challenges now confronting these institutions are testing the strengths and advantages they have long embraced, we explore that sector in some detail. We examine the ways that liberal arts

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colleges can address multi-faceted challenges and offer guidance and encouragement to higher education in general. How can these kinds of institutions build on their distinctive strengths while making significant changes in their programs, structures, and target student populations? That question is one that all institutions must address in one way or another. Thus, in the second part of our essay, we focus on a specific case study, that of Hollins University, which is demonstrating a leadership role in ways that have something to teach virtually any institution.

A COMPELLING NEED FOR CHANGE

Across nearly every sector of American life, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed problems and accelerated trends that are affecting society significantly – for good and ill. In higher education, the forced shift to remote instruction highlighted profound inequities in the lives of today’s students. Some lacked housing security or access to broadband internet. Others endured challenging life situations that remote learning both revealed and often compounded. But the shift to remote teaching and learning also brought long-overdue attention to instructional designers and online learning experts. These professionals stepped up to help others design better learning experiences in the light of the challenges faced by students and professors.

Even before the pandemic, several trends in higher education had been pushing institutions toward reform. Advocates sought improvements in the design of programs, student support systems, and institutional business models. Such changes are clearly needed to serve a markedly different population of students and a new economy—one that requires wholly new talent pipelines. These challenges and opportunities are now nearly universal. While there had been conversation, even prior to the pandemic, about larger institutions and those providing exclusively online learning addressing these issues, we now see institutions of all sorts navigating these issues. Across the sector, the pandemic has accelerated these trends.

The question now is: How can we steer these accelerating trends and use the lessons learned during the pandemic to prioritize a commitment to quality, equity, and purpose? And how might we think about these lessons across institution types, from large research universities to small liberal arts institutions? We must reform our institutions to better serve today’s students. We must prepare students to thrive through leadership in a dynamic, knowledge-based, technology-dependent economy. We must equip them to help bolster a fragile and fractured democracy in a global community facing unprecedented challenges.

But if we are to chart a productive course for higher education reform, we must more fully understand four of the longer-term trends affecting all of higher education that accelerated during the pandemic.

Confidence and Enrollment Trends

For many years, public confidence in higher education has declined, as has overall enrollment—especially of traditional-age students. Much of the drop in enrollment in some states has been caused by regional demographic shifts, but declining confidence in institutions of higher education is a likely factor in most states. Only about half of American adults surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2019 believed that higher education was having a positive impact on the country. About four in ten (38 percent) said the sector was having a negative impact—up from 26 percent in 2012. A 2018 Pew survey found that more than 60 percent believed higher education was heading in the wrong direction (Parker, 2019).

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