


Chapter 1

How We Got Here: Contextualizing the Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the evolving crisis in U.S. higher education, tracing its historical, structural, and economic roots. Rising tuition, declining enrollments, DEI challenges, faculty precarity, and student mental health struggles have been magnified by COVID-19, exposing deep vulnerabilities. Institutions face pressures to innovate while navigating political, financial, and demographic headwinds. This chapter argues that while data and policy analyses provide important context, the personal narratives of students, faculty, staff, and leaders living through institutional upheaval offer crucial insights. Their stories, which follow in the book, reveal the human impacts of closures, financial strain, identity loss, reinvention, and resilience. By foregrounding these experiences, the chapter invites readers to engage in reflection and critical conversations about what is at stake, what has been lost, and what possibilities for renewal might emerge in a rapidly shifting educational landscape.

INTRODUCTION: A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

It takes no more than a morning scroll through the newsfeed to understand that the higher education landscape is changing. Campuses are no longer largely residential with large enrollments. Academic freedom is in the crosshairs, grant funding is not

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reliable, science is less scientific, philosophers have smaller roles, tenure no longer means forever, student success alone is not enough, the value of a college education is being questioned, student debt is real and climbing, and existing for over a century as a college or university campus does not represent forevermore. There is much disequilibrium and cognitive dissonance swirling around campuses. Many, especially those who are employed by colleges and universities feel under attack and that they are living in volatile and uncertain times. This chapter will provide an overview of the current crisis in higher education, explore the factors that have contributed to the crisis, and present the need for the stories of the people on the front lines and their actions and experiences responding to the crisis.

HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF THE CRISIS

In order to fully understand the scope of the current crisis in higher education, it is important to look back on the longstanding systemic and economic factors that have shaped its trajectory. According to National Center for Education Statistics Career and Technical Education (CTE) data (2017), those who graduate with a bachelor's degree tend to have higher salaries and lower rates of unemployment and underemployment. While higher education is seen as an economic necessity in many sectors, a juxtaposition exists across populations and political parties in the United States. The gap between these entities widened after the Great Recession of 2008 and appears to be expanding. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), access, cost of attendance, student debt, and the return on investment of postsecondary education are at the center of these disparate perspectives. Higher education is no stranger to challenges; a search of the literature reveals as far back as the 1960's financial crises, crises around student political unrest, crises of confidence, enrollment crises, etc. However, the current state of crisis in higher education seems to be an amalgam of all of these concerns, resulting in jaw-dropping numbers of institutions failing, being on life support, or closing altogether.

The forces influencing the current crisis in higher education are many, and there has been significant investigation into these contributing factors. The increasing cost of higher education, combined with decreased funding, especially in the public sector, have created the pressure to increase tuition (Mitchell, Leachman & Master-son, 2016). The cost of tuition rose 100% in the 20 years from 2000 - 2020 (Akers 2020). Rising tuition increases student debt and naturally raises the "cost to benefit" equation for potential students seeking to advance their education. Enrollments at institutions of higher education in the United States have fallen for eight consecutive years and are at the lowest rate in the decade. An additional 15% drop in the college age population is predicted between 2025 and 2029. This is the result of a

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