

TOP TOPICS

2024

HIGHER  
EDUCATION

**BVW**

CONSUMER & CATEGORY INSIGHTS SHAPING THE YEAR(S) AHEAD

# TOP TOPICS 2024

Each year society continues to evolve with key themes rising to the top of collective consciousness. Salient topics such as virtue-signaling skepticism, self-care, lifestyle reinvention, gender roles, and AI have gained prevalence and are likely to influence consumers and impact businesses for the years ahead. Brands that maintain awareness and mindful integration with these cultural conversations will be better equipped to resonate with their audiences.

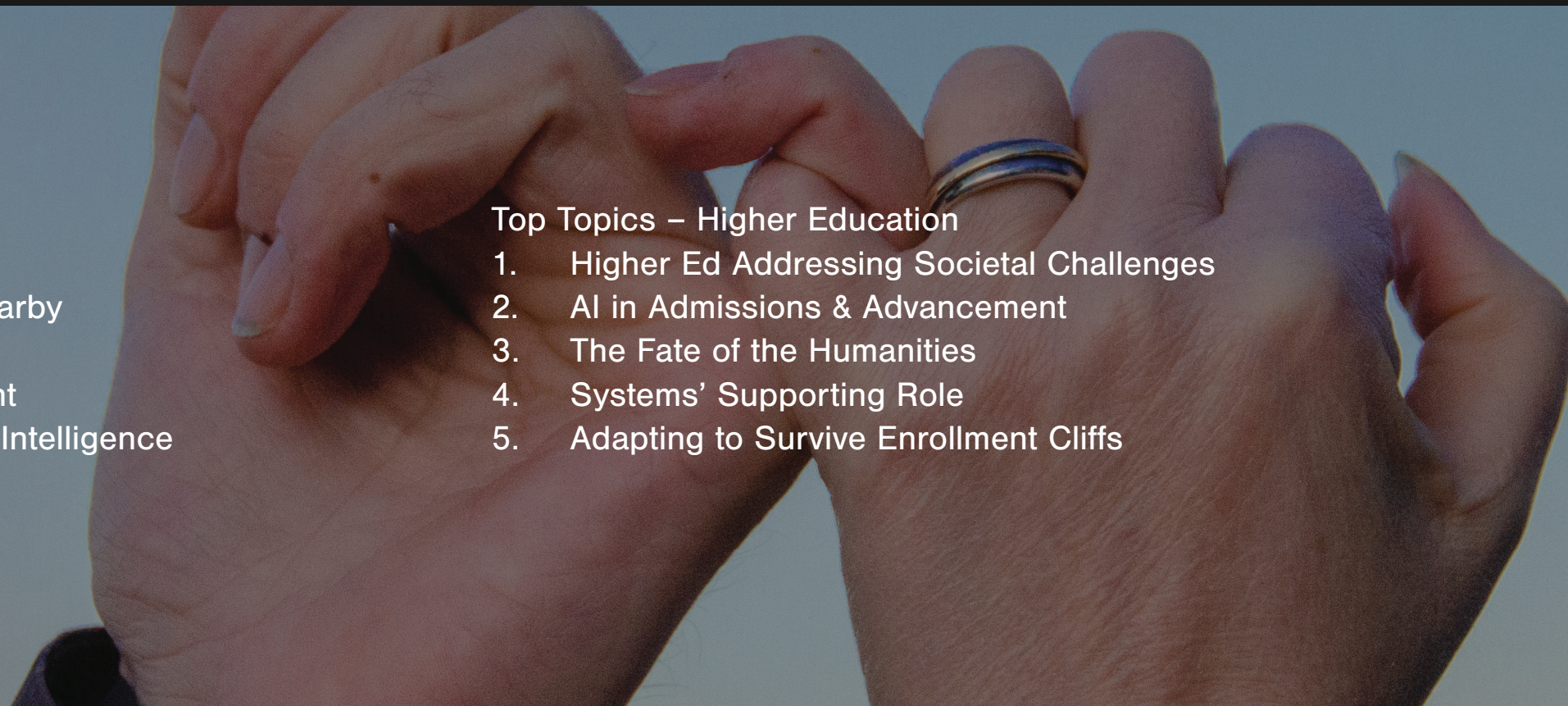
Higher education is tasked with responding and evolving to societal disruptions, including the increasing questioning of the need and value of a college degree. Often caught in the spotlight about current events, education institutions need to selectively contribute to key issues that align with their missions. Higher education systems have an opportunity to support their institutions by engaging with the community and helping raise perceptions of their contribution to continuing education, workforce development, and more. As technology, workforce needs, and demographics drastically shift, institutions that integrate cutting-edge technology, respond to market demands for program offerings, and deploy flexible recruitment and retention strategies will come out on top.

## Top Topics – General

1. Cause Reprioritization
2. Focusing Inward & Nearby
3. Lifelong Reinvention
4. Gender in the Spotlight
5. Artificial vs. Authentic Intelligence

## Top Topics – Higher Education

1. Higher Ed Addressing Societal Challenges
2. AI in Admissions & Advancement
3. The Fate of the Humanities
4. Systems' Supporting Role
5. Adapting to Survive Enrollment Cliffs



# TOP TOPICS GENERAL



## CAUSE REPRIORITIZATION

After years of pushing brands to speak up about social causes, many consumers have become disillusioned with organizations that insert themselves into these conversations and would prefer brands to be a source of unity rather than division. Consumers are detecting virtue signaling and empty statements from a mile away, feeling that organizations should only be highlighting causes that are true to their brand. While consumers still believe causes are important, decision drivers like price and brand quality remain a top priority beyond social stances.

# 8/10

**81%** of Americans agree that “Brands should focus on providing the product/service they are meant to deliver instead of getting involved in social issues.”

- KANTAR U.S. MONITOR

# 68%

**68%** of consumers believe that when a company speaks out today on social issues, it’s a marketing ploy rather than an authentic opinion.

- THE HARRIS POLL

“Management guru Peter Drucker once observed that the most effective brands are not focused on doing things right but, instead, on doing the right things. When brands are built in this way, purpose doesn’t have to be layered in. Do what you promise—indeed, if you don’t, nothing about purpose will be credible anyway.”

- KANTAR U.S. MONITOR

# 84%

Over **eight in ten (84%)** Americans agree that companies must have a track record of acting on their values to be taken seriously.

- THE HARRIS POLL

# 63%

**63%** of Americans agree that “Brands celebrating what brings us together and emphasizing our common interest would strengthen the social fabric.”

- EDELMAN

# 72%

While **72%** of Americans think we’re headed for environmental disaster unless we change our habits quickly, only 24% of shoppers see sustainability as a crucial factor when making a purchase, compared to 53% who say the same for affordability and 71% for quality.

- IPSOS

## FOCUSING INWARD & NEARBY

After years of pressure to focus on the world and the macro challenges around them, Americans are prioritizing their own well-being first. While on the surface this appears self-serving, it is more aligned with the common flight instruction of “putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others” and includes maintaining real relationships and in-person connections with those closest to them.

# 95%

**95%** of U.S. adults say it's important to engage in self-care activities.

- THE HARRIS POLL

# 85%

**85%** of Americans describe self-care as a necessity, not a luxury.

- AMERICAN EXPRESS TRAVEL

Gen Z's appreciation for sad music is in pursuit of connection. The No. 1 search term globally for Spotify listeners 18-24 is the word “sad.” Meanwhile, recent research found that subjects prefer emotional expression in music vs. technical proficiency as this made people feel more connected to others.

- THE NEW YORK TIMES

# 2/3

**Two-thirds** of Americans engage in self-care by listening to music or watching content (i.e. TV shows and movies), spending time with loved ones, and spending time alone.

- AMERICAN EXPRESS TRAVEL

# 58%

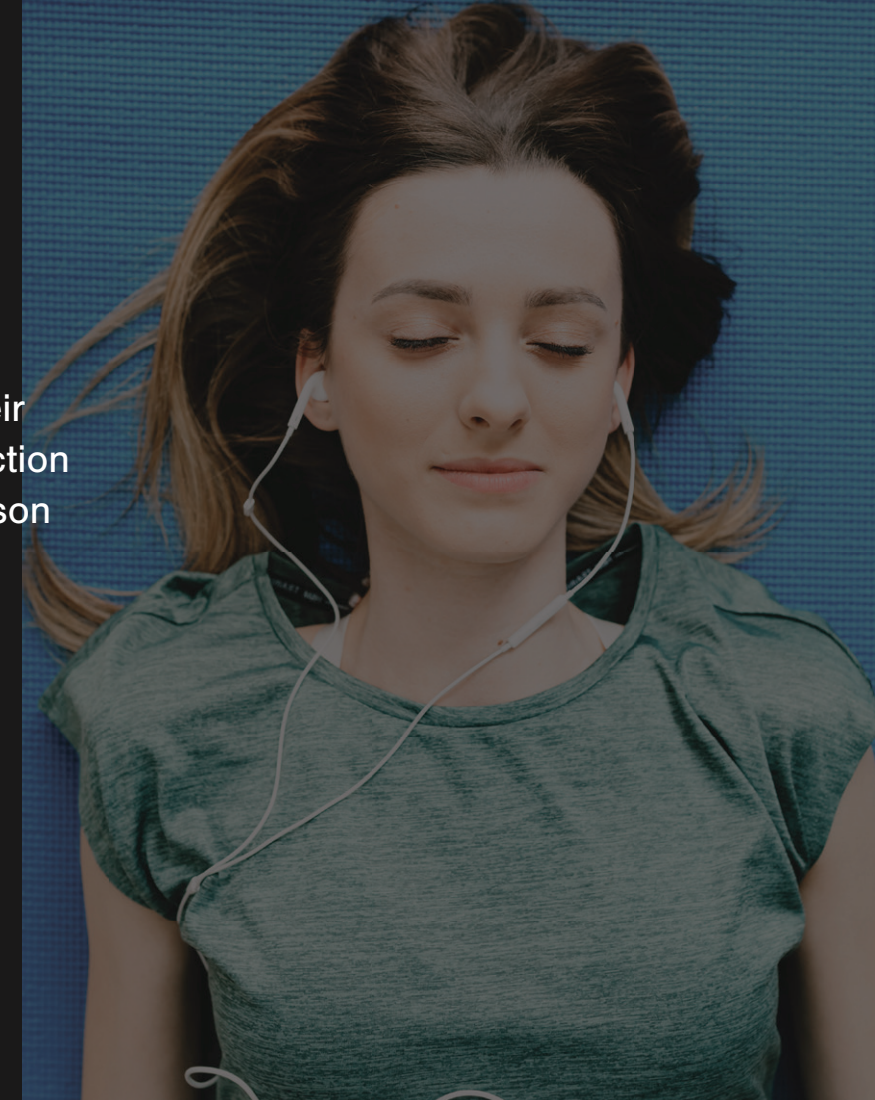
This year's prioritization of self-care has led to more than half (**58%**) of singles surveyed on Bumble reporting being more open about their mental health with friends, family members, and partners.

- BUMBLE

# 42%

**42%** of U.S. consumers say they are focused on improving their spiritual wellness in the next 12 months.

- MINTEL



# LIFELONG REINVENTION

Americans' lives are becoming less linear, as economic disruptions and shifting outlooks change the traditional life pathways. With people living longer, healthier lives, the ability to explore in professional and personal life is more attainable, and the diverse life stages across age groups allow for broader connections.

## 12+

The most recent longitudinal data available finds the average American has **greater than 12** job changes between ages 18-56, with this number likely to continue to increase.

- U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

## 63%

Singles are increasingly open to age diversity in dating as age is no longer a significant factor for **63%** of people, and **59%** of women express a newfound openness to dating someone younger.

- BUMBLE

Pinterest leans into new norms in a spot featuring a young woman being asked typical party questions such as "When are you having kids" or "Are you thinking of buying a house" triggering thought bubbles of her "fur babies" and "wanderlust" Pinterest boards to appear on screen.

- YOUTUBE

## 69%

According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics Study, **69%** of Baby Boomers are already working past 65.

- ESQUIRE

## 43% ↑ 7%

More American couples are choosing not to have children or choosing to have them later in life, according to Census data. As of 2022, **43%** of U.S. households were childless, a **7%** increase from 2012.

- MARKET WATCH

LONGEVITY HAS BECOME A MORE COMMON PURSUIT AS SEEN IN "THE MAN WHO THINKS HE CAN LIVE FOREVER" ARTICLE IN TIME MAGAZINE.

- TIME



# GENDER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Women and girls seem to run the world with recent cultural and economic influence. While Barbie, Taylor, and Beyonce dominated box offices and stages, the smaller screens in people's homes reflected a dated story proving there is progress yet to be made in perceptions of gender. As Americans explore gender norms, brands can engage in these fluid conversations with mutual respect for their audiences regardless of gender.

"THE YEAR IS 2023, AND GIRLHOOD IS EVERYWHERE. WE HAVE "GIRL DINNER." WE HAVE "RAT GIRL SUMMER." TOMATO GIRL. STRAWBERRY GIRL. HOT GIRL WALK. GIRL'S GIRL."

- AD AGE

\$5B

Barbie made movie history as the first women-directed film to gross over a billion dollars while Taylor Swift's tour has a projected **\$5 billion** U.S. consumer spending impact.

- NPR & TIME

1/4

Influenced by movies and pop culture conversations around masculinity and gender roles, **1 in 4** men surveyed say they've actively changed their behavior in their romantic connections to be more vulnerable with people they're dating than ever before.

- BUMBLE

13% ↗ 35%

Women now make up **35%** of workers in the United States' 10 highest-paying occupations – up from 13% in 1980. They have increased their presence in almost all of these occupations, which include physicians, lawyers and pharmacists.

- PEW RESEARCH CENTER

However, in a recently released analysis of advertisements, men were cast in professional roles **73%** more often than women and **30%** more often in leadership roles. Women were cast **46%** more often in domestic roles and approximately **4%** more often in family settings.

- CREATIVE X

7/10

Roughly **7 in 10** Americans from both political parties agree with Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff's statement: "We've kind of confused what it means to be a man, what it means to be masculine. You've got this trope out there that you've got to be tough and angry and lash out to be strong. It's just the opposite. ... Strength is how you show your love for people. ... And how you stick up for other people and [push back] against bullies."

- IPSOS

# ARTIFICIAL VS. AUTHENTIC INTELLIGENCE

Ready or not, AI is advancing across all areas of society. While some sources share optimistic outlooks on the technology's promise, people are still feeling wary. As AI continues to evolve, people will require guardrails and guidelines that help this digital tool be a supplementation to human life rather than a detraction.



## \$2.6-\$4.4

McKinsey estimates that generative AI could contribute between **\$2.6 to \$4.4** trillion to the economy each year.

- MCKINSEY & COMPANY

## 3/4

Three in four Americans across political parties support developing standards, tools, and tests to help ensure AI systems are safe, secure, and trustworthy (**76%**).

- IPSOS

## 64% VS. 36%

Worry about AI trumps wonder by a nearly 2:1 ratio. **64%** say the possibilities that AI presents fill them with worry vs. **36%** who say wonder.

- IPSOS

When asking experts to prioritize just one dimension of AI regulation, "misinformation" was their top concern (**34%**) followed by "national security" (**20%**), while "job protection" (**5%**) and "elections" (**4%**) came last.

- AXIOS

## OVER 6 IN 10

People still generally prefer human-created content to AI-generated including for marketing websites (**62%**), artistic photos (**65%**), journalism articles (**74%**) and illustrations (**74%**).

- IPSOS

## 55% VS. 36%

Just over half of Americans (**55%**) think AI will be another piece of technology among many, while **36%** think AI will fundamentally change American society.

- IPSOS



# TOP TOPICS HIGHER EDUCATION



# HIGHER ED ADDRESSING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

American society is increasingly fractured, which both increases the pressure on universities to take stands on public issues and increases the risks of doing so. This makes it critical for universities to emphasize the importance of knowledge, data, and information literacy, while selectively weighing in on societal issues only when there is a connection to their mission and a thoughtfully backed viewpoint. Beyond making statements on public topics, universities can highlight the ways they are directly involved in positive societal change for less polarizing issues such as community-based health initiatives and support of economic development. Institutions that effectively deploy marketing and communications demonstrating these impacts will lift their perceived value.

48%  41%

A recent survey found that only **41%** of U.S. adults favor organizations taking a public stance on current events, down from **48%** last year.

- GALLUP

However, the top policy areas that majorities of Americans believe businesses should take a public stance on are:

Climate Change **55%**  
Mental Health **52%**

- GALLUP

In a Bipartisan Policy Center panel, college presidents shared their stance on addressing the public about current events. Unless the situation directly affects their college, panelists advise erring on the side of caution and resisting the temptation to comment on every current event.

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

6/10

Roughly **six in 10** Americans say higher levels of education facilitate greater concern about the environment, increased entrepreneurship and business creation, increased citizenship participation in elections and governing, and more productive businesses/organizations.

- LUMINA FOUNDATION & GALLUP

“As anchor institutions in their communities, colleges are being called upon to play a more expansive role than in the past, in areas such as housing, health care, and community planning.”

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

For Gen Z students whose coming of age has been marked by activism, there is an expectation that colleges not wall themselves off but grapple with the most pressing real-world problems. For example:

Western Carolina University’s doctoral physical therapy students operate a pro bono health clinic for un- and under-insured farmworkers.

Cornell gives grants to faculty that create community-engaged curricula such as working with the local textile industry on sustainable fashion.

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

# AI IN ADMISSIONS & ADVANCEMENT

While AI brings advantages in admissions and advancement in higher education, institutions must address transparency, fairness, and privacy concerns. As AI extends beyond classrooms to support administrative departments, it is vital for universities to also maintain a level of personal communication with prospective students and donors to ensure successful recruitment and fundraising. Universities that balance the responsible use of AI with thoughtful human-created communications will likely achieve the most fruitful outcomes.

## 82%

82% of educational admissions departments plan to use AI in 2024. However, 2 in 3 admissions professionals are concerned about the ethics of AI.

- INTELLIGENT

## 7/10

Among admissions professionals who already use AI, 7 in 10 use it to review letters of recommendation or transcripts and 6 in 10 use it to communicate with applicants.

- INTELLIGENT

## 42% 74%

42% of students consider college admissions to be rigged (vs. 58% who consider it fair), and 74% believe the admission process is significantly biased.

- THE HARRIS POLL WITH NACAC

## 57% 33%

Ninety percent of admissions professionals who plan to use AI believe it is 'somewhat' (57%) or 'very likely' (33%) to help with reducing bias in the admissions process.

- INTELLIGENT

"Machine learning provides a huge opportunity to gift officers with pre-vetted information to target their outreach and uncover the next group of key university donors. This would...allow fundraisers to focus their efforts on the individuals most likely to give, thus improving and maximizing their existing donor conversation rate."

- MEDIUM

## \$60M

Indiana University at Bloomington received a \$60 million donation related to AI development with \$22.8 million going toward the construction of their new School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering and the remainder to be used for hiring, scholarships, faculty chairs and support, and fellowships.

- INSIDE HIGHER ED

"AI HAS BECOME BIG AI, LIKE BIG DATA. THERE IS MUCH OF IT TO SORT OUT, EXPERIMENT WITH, AND BE PREPARED TO USE STRATEGICALLY. AI CHATBOTS AND AFFILIATED TOOLS HAVE REMARKABLE BENEFITS — BUT THEY ALSO POSE ETHICAL AND BIAS CONCERNS."

- SMARTBRIEF

# THE FATE OF HUMANITIES

As interest in humanities majors declines and institutions cut or consolidate programs, the future of traditional liberal arts education is being rewritten in real-time. Institutions must adapt to the diminished assumed value of subjects like language and philosophy and address the demand for skills tied to current and future career outcomes. Despite challenges, the fate of humanities is not entirely bleak; the field is evolving, emphasizing enduring qualities such as critical thinking, communication, and cultural understanding. It is vital for institutions hoping to preserve these programs to tell better stories of what the humanities offer with clear ties to outcomes. Incorporating technology, applying interdisciplinary methods, and demonstrating the value of humanities can sustain their meaningful role in higher education.

## 20% 7%

In 2022, only **7%** of Harvard first-year students planned to major in the humanities — down from **20%** a decade earlier and almost **30%** in the 1970s.

- BUSINESS INSIDER

## 40%

Humanities majors in 46 U.S. states show median incomes **40%** higher than those with a high school degree.

- INSIDE HIGHER ED

## 8/10

More than **8 in 10** first-year students said improving their chance of getting a better job is very important to them and the most important reason given for going to college.

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The University of Arizona's "applied humanities" is a new, fast-growing department that includes programs in business administration, fashion studies, game studies, and public health.

- AXIOS

"[The humanities] have always relied on people understanding the intrinsic value of philosophy, history, English literature, and foreign language study, so we haven't made the case distinctly enough to our students for what it does for them after they graduate."

- AXIOS

"To make a degree more valuable, higher education must spell out the skills that students learn on campus and help them to see where those skills are needed in the workforce."

- THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The city of Birmingham, AL enlisted students at the University of Alabama to help collect and analyze data documenting where there was a misalignment between degree and training programs and employer needs.

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



# SYSTEMS' SUPPORTING ROLE

University systems tend to lack awareness and are poorly understood. As higher education is being questioned and increasingly politicized, now is an opportune time for systems to step up branding at state or regional levels to raise overall perceptions of their purpose. Beyond being administrative-level entities that share back-end functions for a group of institutions, higher education systems can emphasize value by highlighting their community and business engagement, K-12 interaction, contribution to economic vitality, and increased harmony and distinctiveness across their member institutions. These efforts are especially important in states with declining populations, where it is critical to not only improve affinity for the system but also support enrollment.

Public institutions are distinctly positioned to engage with employers to better prepare students for the future of work by embedding career learning in required courses, meeting students where they are, and providing a specific context for career development.

- INSIDE HIGHER ED



## 25,000

Systems can partner with chambers of commerce, regional workforce boards, or intermediary organizations as CUNY has with the Jobs Council, a nonprofit collective of employers dedicated to advancing the economic prosperity of low-income New Yorkers, including at least **25,000** jobs to students from CUNY institutions by 2030.

- INSIDE HIGHER ED

## 6 IN 10

About **six in 10** public university first-year students travel less than 50 miles from home for their studies, adding to the necessity for colleges to work in their communities on issues such as school quality, college readiness, and teacher preparation.

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Utah System of Higher Education is eliminating application fees for in-state applicants to increase accessibility and support admissions.

- UTAH SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The University of Texas system is embedding micro-credentials—ranging from data analysis to project management—into the four-year degree, starting with some of its lowest-earning majors, to increase appeal to career-minded students and meet the needs of employers.

- THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## 90%

**90%** of Indiana colleges are already shifting from print to e-transcripts with full adoption expected by 2025. The initiative will save money and create standardized documents that can be shared throughout the system, making enrollment and transfers easier.

- INDIANA CAPITAL CHRONICLE

# ADAPTING TO SURVIVE ENROLLMENT CLIFFS

Continued market pressures related to the coming population cliff raise the stakes for colleges and universities to be more proactive and strategic with their branding efforts, focusing both on better marketing communications and better brand experiences for their students. This involves diversifying program offerings to align with evolving workforce needs, expanding flexible learning options, and enhancing career readiness initiatives. Institutions should focus on strategic marketing to recruit underrepresented groups and improve student support services to aid in retention. Institutions that proactively adapt marketing messages and align them with the lived brand experience can better counter enrollment headwinds.

↑12%

The number of international students in the U.S. increased by **12%** last year over the previous year, with a total of more than 1 million students.

- THE WASHINGTON POST

To entice more non-English speakers to enroll, California passed a law allowing community colleges to offer courses in languages other than English without requiring students to enroll in ESL.

- EDSOURCE

74%

**74%** of high school seniors aspire to go to college but only 66% expect to go.

- YOUTHTRUTH

About a quarter of students who accessed the Common App did not submit it, despite having similar GPAs and test scores, showing an opportunity group to support to aid enrollment.

- COMMON APP DATA IN EDSURGE

To build a pipeline, Purdue University started a polytechnic high school with **60** graduates in 2022. Students who meet academic and other requirements are guaranteed admission to Purdue, with tuition or living expenses for low-income students largely covered.

- THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

37%

46%

**37%** of college students are 25 or older and **46%** are first-gen college students. Rethinking student needs may mean providing daycare, food pantries, transportation, or mental health services.

- LUMINA FOUNDATION

Universities can own the role of continuing education, keeping in mind credentialing disruption outside the traditional higher education industry. Technological improvements include new record systems and badges such as a comprehensive learner record that transcends an individual institution.

- TERRITORIUM





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