

The Road Ahead for Liberal-Arts Colleges



- Appeal to a new and more diverse generation of students
- Connect the liberal arts to a career
- Create niche programs
- Participate in academic consortia

The prospects for many liberal-arts colleges have been dour for decades, and the outlook hasn't brightened recently. Even as the challenges posed by the pandemic begin to recede, liberal-arts colleges face a long list of difficulties, including a loss of public trust in higher education, a decline in the number of traditional-age freshmen, increasing questions about whether a

high-cost college degree is worth the money, and growing competition from lower-cost alternatives.

Liberal-arts colleges emphasize the liberal arts and sciences, and aim to impart general knowledge through small classes and close relationships with professors. But the longstanding liberal-arts-college pitch — “Come, develop your intellectual capacity broadly, and you’ll be prepared for any career” — no longer

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resonates with as many students and parents as it once did.

The liberal-arts colleges poised to thrive — or at least survive — over the next decade will develop specialized programs, figure out how to better recruit students of color and first-generation students, and more closely connect their curricula to the working world. Here are some of the latest trends in how leaders of liberal-arts colleges are positioning their institutions for the road ahead.

Appeal to a new and more diverse generation of students

As the population of traditional college-age students ebbs, liberal-arts colleges will need to reach out to more low-income and first-generation students and students of color — a population that may be skeptical about investing in a liberal-arts education. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce found that the return on investment from a degree at a liberal-arts college lags behind that of other institutions 10 years after enrollment but pays off over a 40-year career. However, many students and parents today are focused on a more-immediate payoff.

“Most people don’t have the luxury of saying, ‘If I go to this institution and major in this field, it will earn me an additional \$1 million over my lifetime,’” says Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. “They’re worried about where they’re going to get the money to pay the bills now.”

Even so, some recent trends may aid liberal-arts colleges. While President Biden’s “free college” agenda appears to be dead in Congress, there’s support on Capitol Hill for expanding the Pell Grant — a change that would help make liberal-arts colleges more affordable. Some liberal-arts colleges are cutting tuition. That might not have much impact on what students actually pay (very few students pay full tuition anyway), but paying a lower list price might seem more feasible and so encourage more students from low-income families to apply. And the trend toward

de-emphasizing test scores in admissions is likely to increase the number of low-income and minority students who are admitted to liberal-arts colleges.

What’s more, a selling point of liberal-arts colleges — as caring institutions where a student is more than just a number — could appeal to parents who have little firsthand experience of higher education.

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Compared with large public universities, “there’s so much more we can do at an institution like ours to wrap our arms around a young person, and make sure they get connected to mentoring, support services, and networks so they don’t fall through the cracks,” says Lori White, president of DePauw University, which has about 2,100 students. “That’s something we can articulate to the families of first-generation students — ‘If you come to a place like DePauw, I’m going to take care of your kid.’”

White says liberal-arts colleges need to expand the areas in which they recruit, and do a better job of providing transfer paths to students who start at community colleges. DePauw is seeking diverse students from nearby Indianapolis, about 40 miles from its small-town campus in Greencastle, Ind. “We have to be more committed to recruiting students from our own backyard,” White says.

Connect the liberal arts to a career

As businesses and community colleges provide more opportunities for young people to earn short-term certificates and step right into a career, liberal-arts colleges

have been caught flat-footed, Pasquerella says. “Unless colleges and universities adapt and say we’ll partner with business and industry, we’ll lose those prospective students,” she says.

For some colleges, that means creating programs with more of a pre-professional focus. “Parents and students are looking for a more-direct line from what they study to a particular career,” White says. “We’re going to have to find programs with a career or vocational focus where we can thrive, and that’s going to drive our strategic planning.”

Randolph-Macon College, in Virginia, has grown from about 1,150 students to almost 1,600 since Robert Lindgren became president, in 2006, in part due to the addition of programs in nursing, engineering, and cybersecurity.

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Randolph-Macon also has a career-services program with a mandatory boot camp in which sophomores identify passions and polish their interview and communication skills. “That’s something that parents have been particularly responsive to,” Lindgren says.

At Bates College, in Maine, the Center for Purposeful Work integrates “questions about work and meaning into the intellectual and personal growth that defines the liberal-arts experience.” Pasquerella served as president of Mount Holyoke College, in Massachusetts, from 2010 to 2016. There she helped create the

Lynk program, which tries to ensure that all students have access to high-impact career-exploration opportunities. The Lynk program provides summer stipends worth up to \$3,600 each, so that even students from low-income families can choose to pursue unpaid or low-paid internships.

Create niche programs

Some liberal-arts colleges have bolstered enrollment by adding unique programs that may have nothing to do with career — but everything to do with passions. Randolph-Macon added an equestrian program in 2010 that’s now up to 70 students. “None of those students would be here without that program,” Lindgren says.

Even as some presidents of liberal-arts colleges are [touting the benefits of remaining small or shrinking](#), most still see economies of scale by growing. A campus is full of singular positions — an admissions dean, a football coach, a college president — and it’s easier to pay their salaries when enrollment is at 1,500, rather than 500.

Adrian College, in Michigan, had dropped to under 1,000 students when Jeffrey Docking became president, in 2005. He added several sports programs — some as unusual as bowling, bass fishing, and e-sports — to help attract students to the college. The additions have helped lift enrollment above 1,700 but have been controversial with professors, since Docking has at times appeared to favor investing in sports over preserving academic programs. In 2020, pressure from professors, students, and alumni forced Docking to abandon a plan to cut academic departments in history, philosophy, and theater.

Marjorie Hass, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, says leaders of liberal-arts colleges must continue to make difficult choices. “The challenges are national, but the solutions are local,” she says. “The institutions that are doing best are the ones that are most deeply attuned to their particular market niche.”

Participate in academic consortia

Not long ago, liberal-arts colleges formed consortia primarily to save money on purchasing or on sharing the cost of back-office functions. Colleges now realize that the biggest cost savings can come from sharing courses and professors, often via virtual classes.

The Online Course Sharing Consortium, started four years ago by the Council of Independent Colleges, now has 300 private colleges that share nearly 6,000 courses. Institutions with empty “seats” in online or hybrid courses can provide access to students at other institutions in the network; the two institutions share the tuition revenue.

Adrian College is part of the Lower Cost Models Consortium, which now has

100 member institutions serving about 185,000 students. Joining the consortium has enabled Adrian to create 21 academic programs. The courses taught remotely through the consortium must be approved by Adrian faculty members.

Randolph-Macon’s Lindgren says he’s watching this new approach but hasn’t embraced it yet. “We’re an in-person place, providing a very personalized educational experience,” he says. “I worry that this will blur that value proposition.”

The challenges facing liberal-arts colleges are as great as ever. But college leaders who are willing to be entrepreneurial, collaborate with other institutions, and reach out to students in new markets are the most likely to make it through what may be even tougher times ahead.

*“The Road Ahead for Liberal-Arts Colleges” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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