

# The Future of Higher Education

## Numbers

"In the half decade beginning in 2025, the HEDI predicts that the cohort size of 18-year-olds will shrink more than 650,000, while the number of first-time college-goers contracts by nearly 450,000" (Grawe).

"Between 2000 and 2015, the number of Latinx college students more than doubled, to 3 million. Their share of overall college enrollment rose between 1996 and 2016 from 8 to 19 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau" ([Cantu](#)).

"High tuition costs were cited by 84 percent of those who said the higher education system was going in the wrong direction, and 65 percent said students weren't getting the skills they need for the workplace" ([Seltzer](#)).

"23% [of Gen Z respondents] believe in avoiding debt at all costs" (Golden).

## Insights

"When Gallup, in a 2015 poll, reported that only 21 percent of adults think college is affordable and that only half of alumni think education is worth the cost, we can see that higher education is failing to explain its value proposition" (Botzman).

"A large number of private colleges could close their doors in the face of intense pressures bearing down on that part of the higher education sector, sending the students who would have otherwise attended private institutions to attend regional public colleges" (Seltzer).

"In the near future, a substantial number of students (including many of the most talented) will go straight to work for employers that offer a good job along with a college degree and ultimately a path to a great career" ([Busteed](#), "This Will Be...").

Graduates who took out more than \$25,000 in loans report lower financial and physical wellbeing for as long as 25 years after graduation." ([Busteed](#), "The Convincing...").

## Introduction

We live in the most dynamic era of higher education in decades. Dramatic **demographic shifts** augur steep declines in college enrollment, as well as changes in the makeup of student populations. Meanwhile, **technological changes**—particularly the growth of online education, but also advances in robotics, virtual reality, and more—force us to rethink the way we deliver content and even the kind of content we should deliver. Advances in **automation**, as Joseph Aoun has suggested in his book *Robot-Proof*, compel us to adjust our curricula to prepare students for a world where robots will do much of the work we have been training humans to do. **Micro-credentials** are taking on increasing significance in the eyes of employers and students alike. Finally, on top of all of these shifts, we are seeing increasing **skepticism about higher education**, especially as declines in state appropriations have brought higher tuition in some parts of the country, helping to fuel concerns about a "**college debt crisis**."

While such changes naturally create anxiety, they also create opportunities for institutions ready to adapt, imagine, and innovate. Creative, energetic academic teams will transform higher education to serve the students, employers, and communities of the future.

## Initiatives and Strategies

**Demographic Shifts:** As Kathleen Ross has noted, first-generation and low-income students are becoming a "New Majority" at colleges and universities, which are also seeing increasing numbers of students of color and non-traditional students. Through tailored recruitment strategies, faculty development on inclusive teaching, and more, institutions can craft their educational experiences to attract these students and help them succeed.

**Technological Changes:** While face-to-face instruction continues to be a powerful format, universities cannot ignore the demand for instruction that serves certain populations—working adults, for example—through alternative formats. I have worked in a variety of realms (face-to-face, online, hybrid)—both as an administrator and as an instructor—and I believe all can co-exist, frequently serving different populations. Whatever the format, we must ensure that the content we deliver is preparing students for the digital world. For instance, data analytics, social media, and automation need to be integrated into the curricula.

**Automation:** As artificial intelligence develops, it will take on more tasks currently performed by people. In *Robot-Proof*, Joseph Aoun argues that universities should focus on teaching students in areas where the human brain surpasses artificial intelligence: empathy, creativity, and innovation. Aoun has singled out experiential education as particularly important. This form of education, the core of IU Kokomo's KEY program, provides students with opportunities to collaborate, apply and integrate their learning, take initiative, and develop a mindset for empathy, inclusion, and more.

"The day when other organizations besides colleges provide a non-degree credential to signify learning might not be far off. One interesting project on this front is an effort to create digital badges, which would allow people to demonstrate skills and knowledge to prospective employers without necessarily having a degree" (Selingo).

"Connections with outside parties and surrounding communities will become ever more critical. Tomorrow's regional public university will need to build connections with school districts, community colleges, employers, policy makers, governments, associations and other outside entities like corporations. Doing so will enable it to bolster local communities, better integrate knowledge and career pipelines, and strengthen its own financial standing in a time of constrained state funding" (Seltzer).

"There's no better investment return than college—not even close. Long-standing economic analyses have shown that people who earn a bachelor's degree—on average—make considerably more money over their lifetime than those with a high school diploma. And according to researchers Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney, an investment in a college degree delivers an inflation-adjusted annual return of more than 15%, significantly better than the historical return on stocks (7%) and bonds, gold and real estate (all below 3%)" (Busteed, "The Convincing...").

"We are awash in data, so the next of our new literacies is data literacy, the capacity to understand and utilize big data through analysis" (Aoun).

". . . true cultural ability is beyond the reach of machines. It requires empathy, discretion, and a very human nuance" (Aoun).

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**Micro-credentials:** As Aoun notes, universities can continue to serve their alumni with instruction designed to help them adapt to the changing world. Micro-credentials will take on more importance as professionals in various fields need to master new technologies and otherwise cope with a dynamic, global economy. Universities that lead in this realm not only serve their populations, but also stand to gain in enrollment, revenue, and prestige.

**New Competition:** As companies such as Disney and Discover provide opportunities for students to earn degrees on the job, universities must be open to partnerships. As experts in both content and delivery, we will remain vital providers, but we should be prepared to adapt to this new environment, perhaps by delivering our content in new venues and formats.

**Skepticism about Higher Education:** More than half of the respondents to a 2017 Gallup survey reported only "some" or "very little" confidence in colleges and universities. Academic leaders must do more to connect with communities and citizens, demonstrate their value, and serve them in meaningful ways. Camps, lifelong-learning programs, and partnerships with employers, non-profits, and school districts can help build trust in higher education—and, in turn, drive up enrollment and charitable gifts. At IU Kokomo, we have expanded camp opportunities, established a downtown art gallery, and invited community members to join students on KEY trips.

**College Debt:** The perception of a college debt crisis actually could be an opportunity for IU's regional campuses to attract students. After all, as Amy Golden has noted, many of today's students are more debt-averse than their predecessors, and the cost of tuition at an IU regional campus is much less than the cost of tuition at any private institution.

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