

Four Things I Hope to See From U.S. Higher Education in 2023

BY DAVID ROSOWSKY

AS WE ENTER THE FOURTH YEAR of the pandemic or the second year of the post-pandemic era, depending on your perspective, here are four things to look for from higher education in 2023—a refreshed look at what continues to be a critical time with as yet unmet challenges and unrealized opportunities for colleges and universities.

1 Recent years have seen arguments made for colleges and universities to abandon the strategy of chasing rankings. Now some hope that they abandon the rankings altogether, following the lead of law schools, medical schools, and others that have done the same. Consider the rankings experiment tried, tested, and failed.

Rankings have become ubiquitous. They have crept into mission statements, strategic plans, and board priorities. For decades now, colleges and universities have been investing significant amounts of time, energy, and money in chasing the rankings. Externally, it does little. Internally, the pursuit creates controversy and strife as faculty members (and students) try to understand the reason for the investments, the competition, and the sometimes seemingly singular focus on rankings. There is scant evidence they have done anything to hold colleges and universities to account, drive real progress, improve applicant pools or student quality, or elevate institutional standings. And more recently, we have seen bad actors pursuing bad strategies to game the rankings, submit false information, and get caught. This both highlights the “gamification” of rankings, allowed or even encouraged (obliquely or otherwise)

by ranking organizations, and the extent to which administrators may be willing to go to secure a higher ranking. It also seriously damages the reputation of the offending and exposed university.

Colleges and universities can do more to advance their mission, their impact, and (yes) their standing by competing with themselves to get better, rather than by competing with others. After all, it’s a zero-sum game. For one school to move up in any given ranking, one school must move down. If all schools are competing against one another for rankings, the only way for all schools to be able to show they have moved up higher in a poll is to have an explosion of new rankings of different characteristics/outcomes. In that way, everyone can win, somewhere. Once that happens (and it can be argued that it has), these rankings have even less value.

Colleges and universities shouldn’t just abandon the chase, they should abandon the rankings altogether. They should know their peer and aspirant institutions and follow their efforts and progress. They should understand the national higher ed landscape and look for successful stories and best practices. Focusing on academic program quality and student success has never steered an institution or its leadership wrong. If it’s a research institution, focus also on research expenditures, throughput, and impacts. If there is a clinical mission, focus also on patient outcomes. Universities also should know themselves. They should know their audience and respect them. They should commit to serving them, meeting their needs, and providing measurable/proven

value. They should set their goals, achieve against them, and tell their story about why that commitment and success matters. If they matter, people will pay attention.

Rankings are just one way people judge quality. The rankings and the systems that undergird the rankings are biased and broken. It’s time to move past them.

2 Colleges and universities should embrace authentic engagement with their constituents and their communities. The stresses of the pandemic, the loss of public confidence, both the enrollment and the workforce challenges, and even the forces that are challenging or diminishing our democracy all point to the need for colleges and universities to commit themselves to engage authentically and meaningfully with those around them. This includes creating time and space to hear from (and really listen to) students, faculty, and staff about their challenges, changing needs, and expectations of their academic community, but also about the ways they want to contribute to finding mission-focused, outcomes-driven, and sustainable paths forward for the institution.

In addition, this includes regular and intentional outreach, engagement, and partnership with community members, community organizations, public agencies, and local businesses. Such touch points and action points break down barriers, build trust, create new opportunities, and add value in both directions. They also bring people, ideas, and resources together to address mutual needs and shared priorities.

The public needs to understand the



importance of higher education today, the opportunities colleges and universities are providing to their students, and the many ways they are contributing to their neighborhoods and communities. And colleges and universities need to do a much better job articulating their value proposition, not only to prospective students and families, but to legislators, business leaders, and the broader public. They should articulate and reaffirm commitments (publicly, loudly, and often) to access, affordability, career readiness, post-graduation outcomes, social mobility, discovery and innovation, service, lifelong learning, program/degree options for nontraditional students, and local/regional economic impact. And they should communicate specific outcomes to close the loop on their clearly articulated value proposition. Communicating mission, value, and impact to the public—whether it's the local business community, prospective students and their families, or state legislators—and authentic engagement with constituents to build trust and create meaningful partnerships must be ongoing commitments, not periodic exercises.

3 Colleges and universities should commit to facing hard choices and making hard decisions to cut content, not keep trimming around the edges. This will be controversial and create backlash. But, for most institutions, the time has long passed for making these needed reforms. Years, even decades, of cutting around the edges rather than eliminating programs has depleted morale, created internal com-

petition that serves to further erode both morale and efficacy, and left many institutions at risk of being unable to deliver on mission. University leaders must have the vision and the courage to make these needed reforms (reductions, mergers, or eliminations), and boards must have the wisdom and fortitude to back them up. Boards must stand visibly and without wavering behind their presidents, stand up to criticisms and resistance, and set clear timelines for needed change. Hire the right leader. Give that leader a mandate, a timeline, cover, support, and job security. Hiring and steadfastly supporting the right individual, while setting clear expectations and timelines for achieving milestones and affecting needed change, can end the revolving door of campus leadership that has become all too common on our campuses. Stability is a platform for success. These positions are difficult enough without making those that serve sacrificial.

4 Colleges and universities should reaffirm, promote, celebrate, and leverage their foundational commitment to being a public good to becoming the public square for civil discourse, dialogue, and debate. Society should look to colleges and universities to help our nation heal, redefine middle ground, embrace civility, and foster civil discourse and scientific inquiry. Civility should be added to the ideals of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Colleges and universities must remain institutions and communities of free inquiry, discovery, and thought. They must strive for inclusion of all thoughts,

welcome all perspectives, and commit to maintaining a nurturing and safe space for students to learn facts, form opinions, shape values, and defend all of these. U.S. higher education must, at all costs, resist becoming politicized (as so many other institutions in our society have become in recent years) and must eschew extreme ideologies that oppose, prohibit, or threaten others. Just as higher ed has been called upon to solve social problems or shape new policy in the past, colleges and universities can step up today to help reestablish and reaffirm middle ground as a place free from extreme ideology, hatred, violence, and nontolerance. (By definition, of course, our colleges and universities seek to end ignorance, replacing it with knowledge, understanding, perspective, and reasoned opinion.) In this way, they become an example for individuals, families, communities, political parties, and our society. By creating the inviting and welcoming physical and intellectual spaces, colleges and universities can become the literal and figurative public squares in our communities and across our nation.

Our nation has become so polarized, so marginalized, so pushed to the extreme edges that our very democracy is being threatened from within. Higher ed can lead our nation on a return to civility, to fact-based discourse, to freedom of opinion and thought, to tolerance, and to building an educated, engaged, and prosperous society. As they have been so many times in our history, our nation's higher educational institutions are called upon once again. They can, and must, become the public square that is so desperately needed and will be so hopefully embraced. ■

Editor's note: This article is excerpted by the author from a longer essay published by Forbes.com.

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