

Mission critical: Presidents' perspectives on how universities serve society in turbulent times

Executive summary

The TIAA Institute conducted research to explore how higher education leaders are thinking about their institutions' roles and societal impact during this period of unprecedented challenges and profound change. Through interviews with 15 college and university presidents, primarily from small to medium-sized private institutions, the study explored what universities are “good for” and “good at,” while also taking into account Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) considerations and, importantly, institutional responses to the changing political and economic landscape. The good for/good at framing arises from Dr. Chris Brink, former Vice-Chancellor of both the University of Stellenbosch and Newcastle University, and author of *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is Not Enough* (2018), in which he offers the timely reminder that colleges and universities should both strive for academic excellence and fulfill social purposes.

Kyle Farmbry
TIAA Institute Fellow

Surya Kolluri
TIAA Institute

Anne Ollen
TIAA Institute



The interviews took place in April and May 2025.
Discussions focused on the following topics:

- Institutional approaches to social impact
- Environmental initiatives and sustainability
- Governance evolution and challenges
- ESG framework application in higher education
- Current challenges and opportunities for higher education
- Future directions for higher education

The research reveals that institutions are doubling down on their missions while facing significant challenges, including financial pressures, demographic shifts, and anti-higher education messaging trends. Presidents emphasized the critical roles of higher education in strengthening democracy, enabling social mobility, and serving as anchor institutions in their communities. The study identifies ten key themes, discussed below, from mission-centric leadership to democratic engagement, highlighting both opportunities and challenges facing the sector. Conversations also illuminated broad perspectives on the forces shaping higher education.



The current higher education landscape

The higher education sector is currently facing unprecedented challenges, adding complexity to the troubling headwinds already confronting campus leaders for many years. As one president noted in [April OR May] 2025, “a literal transformation of higher education has happened in the last ten weeks or so.”

Key pressures include:

- Federal policy changes affecting funding, oversight, and operating models
- Growing anti-higher education messaging trends
- Changing public perceptions of higher education’s value, market saturation with nearly 4,000 U.S. higher education institutions
- Demographic shifts changing composition and needs of student bodies and threatening enrollment stability
- Rising financial pressures, prompting many to describe the current business model as ‘unsustainable’ or ‘broken’
- Post-COVID adaptations and stakeholder expectations around mental health, remote work, student needs, and more.

Key themes

Mission-centric leadership

Higher education leaders are emphasizing their institutional missions as stabilizing forces during extreme turbulence. For institutions with historical missions serving specific populations or religious affiliations, this mission-centric stance seems especially crucial. As one president noted,

“The more turbulent the external environment, the more important and compelling are institutions’ missions to students and their families.”

This approach manifests through deep integration of values across campus operations, enhanced community engagement initiatives, and renewed focus on founding principles that continue to guide contemporary community engagement. Commitment to mission also helps support responses to concerns about diversity and inclusion efforts.

Reclaiming the public narrative

There’s an urgent need for higher education to reclaim its public narrative regarding value and impact. Presidents emphasize that boards and business partners must play

active roles in communicating higher education’s importance as *both* a public and private good. This involves combating growing anti-higher education trends and demonstrating concrete evidence of higher education’s contribution to society and workforce development. More needs to be done to effectively demonstrate higher education’s impact on individual and community well-being.

Financial sustainability

Higher education institutions face significant financial pressures that threaten their long-term viability. Presidents consistently describe the current model as “unsustainable” or “broken,” citing multiple critical challenges. Rising costs, inflation, and potential federal funding cuts create significant strain on institutional budgets, while rising tuition discount rates and slim operating margins further stress financial stability.

The research reveals particular concern about deferred maintenance costs and the potential loss of federal support, including Pell Grant funding, Work Study, and federally subsidized loans.

As one president noted,

“Many institutions have slim margins, and [are encountering] an additional 10-12% in additional costs—thus making it difficult to run an institution.”

This financial pressure is especially acute for small, private institutions that are tuition-dependent, leading many presidents to call for a fundamental reinvention of higher education's business model.

Governance and leadership challenges

The evolution of governance frameworks emerges as a critical theme, with presidents reporting significant challenges in balancing traditional shared governance with the need for rapid decision-making. Presidents describe mounting pressures around board composition, understanding of current headwinds and implications, decision-making speed, and institutional responsiveness to crises.

One president powerfully captured this tension:

“In terms of higher education's nimbleness and resilience in times of extreme pressure... many people in the academy are still operating under a 1950s fantasy about what they imagine the English department at Harvard looked like then.”

Many institutions face challenges with board terms, some having members serving for several decades, while others struggle with board engagement and understanding of roles.

Faculty/board tensions and the need for speedier decision-making processes further complicate governance structures, particularly as institutions navigate unprecedented situations requiring rapid responses.

Anti-higher education climate

Higher education leaders express deep concern about growing anti-higher education trends in society and declining public trust in their institutions. Presidents report that higher education is no longer viewed as a social good or common good, with facts and data supporting the economic and societal contributions increasingly viewed with suspicion. As one president noted, many people now see higher education as “a luxury good targeted to an audience of elites.”

Conversations reveal many concerns, including attacks on academic freedom and free speech, questioning of higher education's value proposition, and political pressures on institutions. Presidents particularly emphasized how some segments of society actively discourage college attendance, preferring to direct students toward technical trades. This shift reflects a broader societal trend of viewing higher education as “more transactional than transformational,” threatening the fundamental mission

of colleges and universities as centers of learning and intellectual discourse, as well as their role in preparing an informed and active citizenry.

Local and regional impact

In response to the current climate, higher education institutions are increasingly embracing their roles as anchor institutions in their communities, shifting focus from national prestige to local impact. This transformation reflects a deeper understanding of universities' responsibilities to their immediate communities. As one president noted,

“We are in and of [the city in which the school is located].”

This local engagement manifests through partnerships with community organizations, economic development initiatives, and student placement in local organizations.

Another president put it this way:

“Even for people who don't go to college, they benefit from higher education. We all benefit from having people who can be our doctors and dentists and teachers, lawyers, and engineers.”

Presidents noted their institutions' economic impacts too. One said,

“We're big employers in our communities. We provide jobs, we spend millions of dollars on goods and services in our communities that benefit all the small businesses around our campuses.”

Post-COVID adaptations

Institutions continue to grapple with post-pandemic realities, including mental health challenges, remote work expectations, and changing student needs. Presidents note there was “no playbook” for COVID or post-COVID, requiring ongoing adaptation and flexibility in institutional approaches.

Social and environmental impact

Higher education institutions are actively engaging in environmental and social initiatives that demonstrate their commitment to broader societal impact. Presidents describe comprehensive sustainability programs ranging from solar installations to food waste reduction, often driven by both environmental responsibility and cost savings. Students are frequently the drivers of initiatives in these areas. One president noted:

“Students have challenged the institution by asking about the college's investments in environmental efforts.”

This highlights how student activism has helped drive institutional commitment to sustainability goals.

ESG framework implementation

While Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) terminology isn't widely used in higher education, institutions are actively engaged in related practices. Even so, institutions are deeply involved in environmental stewardship, social impact, and governance evolution, often driven by mission alignment, students, and practical considerations. One president noted that “*corporatizing*” the term ESG makes use of it less palatable to the sector. This sentiment came through in several of the interviews. While interviewees had a lot to say about the E, the S, and the G components

individually, they were not as comfortable speaking to their views on ESG altogether.

Democracy and public good

Higher education institutions play a fundamental and critical role in strengthening democracy and serving the public good, and this clearly emerged as a critical theme across presidential interviews. Several presidents emphasized their institutions' roles as modern public squares and convening places for civic engagement and democratic discourse.



As one president powerfully articulated:

What we're good for is strengthening the fabric of society. What we're good at is teaching, invention, discovery, and creative production. What we're good for is making a strong democracy, creating an educated populace who can tend to that democracy. What we're good for is convening, like the old agora in Greece... Higher education is like the modern public square. This is where the exchange of ideas happens. We're the convening place. We're the place where people go to cheer on a football team or watch a musical production. We're the place where neighbors' kids learn to ride their bikes in our parking lots. We're the places where people walk their dogs. We're the place that serves as a polling place on election day, and has all of our neighbors come in to cast their votes.

We have chapels where people get married. I mean... this is like the fabric of society. What we're good at is contributing to civil society. And without us. I don't know what other sector steps in to be the town square and the convening place, and the celebration place. And the place of learning and knowledge. The repository in our libraries. The gathering spot is on our football field. What other institution in America serves these purposes, if not higher education?

Several presidents highlighted specific initiatives, including public policy training institutes, democratic awareness programs, and civic engagement centers. They emphasized that preparing students for democratic participation remains as crucial as preparing them for careers, particularly during times of significant societal change and polarization.

A few of the presidents shared ongoing concerns that students need to be better versed in civic engagement.

As one president noted,

“I am still very worried that I don't think we've learned how to mix the preparation of students for careers and the preparation of students for democratic life. Those things have to be intertwined... How do we really create a next generation of not only innovators, but also democratic citizens who participate in civic life? How do we train for pluralism, for dialogue across difference?”

Recommendations

The research points to several recommendations for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff so that they can help their institutions better serve society and navigate these turbulent times.

Strengthen coordinated action and responses

Presidents were unified in their view about the urgent need for coordinated responses across higher education institutions. As one president noted:

“We’re trying to engage in collective action and speak with one voice.”

Higher education leaders should develop stronger coalitions and unified responses to current challenges while acknowledging that “collaboration is scary because it leads to a level of vulnerability.” While several leaders applauded bold and vocal defiance of certain political positions, others expressed concern that since not all institutions are in the position of risking such boldness, there must be more collaboration to articulate responses that are sound for all, or to at least be clear about which types of institutions are supportive of different positions.

Reclaim the public narrative

Presidents emphasized the critical need to reframe higher education’s value proposition and public narrative. Institutions must work with boards and partners in other sectors (e.g., business, healthcare, philanthropy, etc.) to demonstrate higher education’s contribution to society. Higher education institutions should also engage the media differently and better communicate the message of their value to broader society. This includes better articulating what universities are “good for” as opposed to just what they’re “good at.” As one president noted,

“It’s astonishing to me how we have somehow allowed the media to control the message on the value of higher education. And to really twist it into almost the exact opposite of what reality is.”

Develop sustainable financial models

Given significant financial pressures, institutions must develop new sustainable operating models. This will require exploring and implementing innovative approaches to address rising costs, enrollment challenges, and slim operating margins. The recent TIAA Institute report *The Future of Higher Education in the Era of Longevity* presents examples of how colleges and universities are leveraging the longevity economy to create new revenue streams and increase impact.

Enhance local community engagement

The research suggests institutions should deepen their roles as anchor institutions in their communities. This includes developing stronger local partnerships and contributing to regional economic development, both of which can help reclaim the public narrative about the value of higher education. When stakeholders see benefits right where they live, they become more supportive and, in turn, can spread positive messages about public good contributions.

Modernize governance structures

Presidents emphasized the need to evolve governance models to balance traditional shared governance with the need for rapid decision-making in today’s environment. This includes addressing board composition, engagement, and knowledge, as well as institutional decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This qualitative research underscores that higher education is at a pivotal inflection point, with institutions simultaneously facing unprecedented challenges while remaining committed to their core missions. The findings demonstrate that successful navigation of current challenges requires institutions to strengthen collective action while reclaiming the public narrative about higher education’s value.

The research particularly emphasizes higher education’s fundamental role in society’s fabric, a role that should not be overlooked.

“The United States cannot achieve its full promise,” one president noted, “without a vibrant, thriving higher education sector. Economic prosperity, research innovation, patents, not to mention an informed citizenry. None of this is possible without higher education.”

The path forward requires innovative approaches to coordinated action, financial sustainability, deeper community engagement, and the evolution of governance models. Another president warned about the stakes:

“It’s almost incalculable how harmful this [attack on higher education] is going to be. And even if we can turn things around, it’s going to take decades to rebuild what’s getting broken right now.”

Interviewed leaders:¹

- | | |
|---|--|
| Connie Book – Elon University | Raj Echambadi – Illinois Institute of Technology |
| Nancy Cantor – Hunter College | Thomas Evans – University of the Incarnate Word |
| Bryan Coker – Maryville College | Damian Fernandez – Warren Wilson College |
| Lawrence Czarda – Greensboro College | Robert Kelly – University of Portland |
| Kenneth Daly – St. Thomas Aquinas College | Paul Pribbenow – Augsburg University |
| Nora Demleitner – St. John’s College ² | Suzanne Rivera – Macalester College |
| Risa Dickson – University of LaVerne | Frank Shushok – Roanoke College |

About the TIAA Institute

The TIAA Institute helps advance the ways individuals and institutions plan for financial security and organizational effectiveness. The Institute conducts in-depth research, provides access to a network of thought leaders, and enables those it serves to anticipate trends, plan future strategies, and maximize opportunities for success.

To learn more, visit tiaainstitute.org.



Join the conversation online:
[@TIAAInstitute](https://twitter.com/TIAAInstitute)

1 One of the fifteen presidents interviewed opted to not have their name and institution listed in the report.
2 Note: President Demleitner stepped down from her role at St. John’s College in mid-May. The interview with her occurred in early May.