

Principled Leadership to Advance Public Trust in Higher Education

At the January 2026 AAC&U Annual Meeting, administrators, faculty, and staff from colleges and universities of all types, as well as representatives from across sectors, have come together to confront urgent challenges, consider approaches to rebuilding public trust, and chart a path forward to safeguard the principles foundational to American higher education.

What is the most effective way for leaders to collaborate to advance public trust in higher education? How do we move forward and defend our values and principles amid a lack of unanimity?



“Trust is a function of clarity and consistency. To renew trust in the transformative power of higher education, institutions should identify—as clearly and loudly as possible—the good things colleges and universities provide for individuals, for families, for communities, for states, for our country, and for the world. The public should recognize higher education for the uniquely valuable benefits it is equipped to provide—and it should understand those benefits as the result of a dependably consistent commitment to free inquiry and academic freedom, readily available in equal measure to all students and faculty, regardless of ideology or identity.”

Will Creeley

Legal Director, Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression



“Today is as much about the future as it is defense. Our approach must be consistent, clear, and collaborative. We have serious jobs in higher education. When we see ourselves as part of an ecosystem pushing for a more democratic nation, we can develop strong relationships that positively impact our communities, states, and nation.

Our sector’s diversity is a strength—and now more than ever, we need to focus on action and impact, not perfection and process. Our collective vision should be one where teaching and learning are free from censorship, our sector is free from partisan interference, and we develop relationships to ensure all have an opportunity to thrive.”

Michael H. Gavin

President and CEO, The Alliance for Higher Education



“At the Leadership Conference we believe learning is leading and it is how we build opportunity and community. It’s how we perfect this union. Most people just want to know that they can afford to go to college and that when there, they will be seen, served, and respected as they learn. That requires that we reach out and invite in. Its diversity and the ability to disagree from a place of information and inclusion. We multiply, not divide. That is the math of a vibrant democracy.”

Maya Wiley

President and CEO, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

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“ The higher education ecosystem in the US is wired for competition. Rankings, star faculty recruitment, undergraduate admissions, and research dollars are all ways for institutions to compete. A cohesive approach to the current challenges is unlikely. However, it is not necessary for any institution to say that just because a particular strategy is best for them, that it is best for everyone. The undercurrent of critique in both directions that attends many of the present conversations is not helpful. Each institution has enough of its own challenges without having to explain why it's not following the lead of one of its outspoken peers. A simple thing to do in this time is for presidents, and especially boards, to focus on their own institutions. ”

Holden Thorp
Editor-in-Chief, Science Family of Journals



“ At SUNY, we are committed to delivering on public higher education's essential role in providing affordable academic excellence and preparing our students for success in the workforce and in life. We invest in our campuses to lead the way on research and development for the public good, and to train the new generation of New York leaders and innovators that will help move our state and society forward. SUNY campuses not only prepare our students to succeed in careers they find meaningful and rewarding, but to also be good citizens of our democracy and engaged members of their communities. ”

John B. King Jr.
Chancellor, State University of New York



“ The core purposes of higher education—advancing knowledge, fostering social mobility, creating opportunity, and benefiting society—are the unifying principles in this existential fight. We are fighting for the right of students to learn, the right of citizens to be informed, and the right for communities to have a better future—not just intellectually, but economically. That is why values like academic freedom are so important—they enable risk taking and the research and innovation that has made American higher education the envy of the world. We must do multiple things at once, including addressing the higher ed affordability crisis because that is how we best increase access and ensure that our institutions are truly serving the public good. ”

Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers



“ Much of our trust in higher education can be restored by correcting two longstanding patterns. First, as artificial intelligence now exemplifies, technology's influence on the workplace and the economy has always outpaced its influence on the college curriculum. Second, the sticker price of a college degree has outpaced our strategic use of new technologies to control costs. Campus leaders will revive America's belief in the promise of college by innovating in those two areas. And while doing so, they should model the Black College tradition of arming students with dual competencies: 'a skill set for a better me' and 'a mindset for a better we.' Employability matters, but so does the quality and trajectory of American democracy! ”

John Silvanus Wilson Jr.
Senior Fellow and Executive Director, The McGraw Center for Educational Leadership, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Resources:

- [Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education](#)
- [AAC&U Annual Meeting](#)