

The Trust Agenda

A Framework for Advancing
Public Trust in Higher Education

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FOREWORD

For more than a century, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has championed the role of higher education, particularly liberal education, in advancing socioeconomic opportunity, strengthening democracy, and preparing students to navigate a complex and rapidly changing world.

Yet today, that role is increasingly questioned. Public confidence in colleges and universities has declined to troubling levels, and the sector faces growing political, financial, and cultural pressures that challenge both its autonomy and its purpose.

The Trust Agenda: A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education speaks directly to this moment, acknowledging both the depth of the challenge and the reality that public trust in higher education cannot be strengthened without an authentic commitment to trustworthiness—demonstrated through action, accountability, and meaningful engagement with the communities that institutions of higher education are meant to serve.

The Trust Agenda outlined in this report offers a pragmatic and forward-looking framework for building confidence and invigorating a shared sense of purpose with the public. It calls on colleges and universities to strengthen community partnerships, recommit to inclusive excellence, tell a clearer and more resonant story that aligns with the lived experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds, and coordinate a mission-centered defense of higher education, while rejecting false dichotomies between autonomy and accountability and between tradition and innovation.

At its core, this work is about connection. It is about connecting institutions with the communities that sustain them, aligning academic missions with public needs, and affirming higher education's role in advancing both individual opportunity and the common good. It is also about

recognizing that trust is not static; it must be continually earned, renewed, and demonstrated in changing social, political, and economic contexts.

This report is ultimately a call to leadership. Advancing public trust will require presidents, provosts, faculty, staff, and governing boards to act with clarity, courage, and a renewed sense of shared responsibility. It will require collaboration across institutions and sectors, as well as a willingness to confront difficult questions about how higher education can better fulfill its mission in the twenty-first century.

The stakes could not be higher. The vitality of higher education is inseparable from the health of our democracy and the strength of our civic life. If we are to sustain the promise of higher education as a force for opportunity, innovation, and the public good, we must meet this moment with purpose and resolve.

This report offers a thoughtful and compelling road map. Its success, however, will depend on the willingness of leaders across higher education to act on its recommendations and to embrace the shared responsibility of building a more responsive, resilient, and trusted sector.



Lynn Pasquerella

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report about how leaders of colleges and universities can advance public trust in higher education and strengthen the social contract between campuses and the communities they serve.

Colleges and universities face a moment of crisis, with their missions, funding, and operations under threat. At the same time, US public opinion surveys show that support for higher education is at historic lows. The report outlines a response to these challenges that can build public trust, make campuses more trustworthy, and enable colleges and universities to defend their missions successfully.

The report's recommendations include a combination of internal reforms, external communications, and collaborative defense strategies. The unifying theme of The Trust Agenda is a need for increased and meaningful connection in higher education—between campuses and their communities; among faculty, staff, students, and administrators; across institutions; and with society as a whole.

Key Recommendations

- **ACCELERATE INNOVATION.** Break down internal barriers to change and improvement, showing that colleges can solve their own problems without external pressure and can develop new and effective initiatives to advance their missions.
- **PRIORITIZE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.** Develop trusted and mutually beneficial relationships with community partners, improving the quality of life for those who attend college and those who do not.
- **RECOMMIT TO INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE.** Build a campus that is student centered, where learners from all walks of life feel welcomed and supported toward success.
- **TELL A CLEARER STORY.** Deploy public communications that tie higher education's role as an engine of social and economic mobility to popular civic values like freedom, fairness, and strength.
- **COORDINATE A MISSION-CENTERED DEFENSE.** Collaborate within and across institutions to defend the mission of higher education against government overreach.

Introduction: A Crisis of Public Trust

“Learned institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people.”

—JAMES MADISON¹

Over the past decade, an escalating political campaign has emerged at the state and federal levels to restrict college and university curricula, programming, research, and operations in the United States. That campaign is now doing significant financial and educational damage to colleges and universities and unraveling the long-standing partnership between the American government and institutions of higher learning.²

The situation American higher education finds itself in is alarming. According to the April 2026 update of the global Academic Freedom Index, campuses in the United States now have less freedom of research and teaching, and less independence from government control, than in any country in the Western Hemisphere except for the authoritarian states of Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The United States’ falloff in the index has been more rapid even than the repression

of academic institutions under authoritarian governments in Hungary, India, and Turkey.³

Against the backdrop of these tightening restrictions, more and more Americans have come to distrust colleges and universities. Polls show that American confidence in and support for higher education has declined sharply over the last decade.⁴ American political actors driving the current attacks on higher education have accelerated, deepened, and taken advantage of this decline in public trust, but they did not cause it. Their efforts have been successful only because the underlying terrain of public opinion has shifted.⁵

There is no way around it: If college and university leaders hope to fulfill their institutions’ missions of educating students and generating knowledge, they need to tackle the problem of declining public trust.

¹ James Madison to W. T. Barry, August 4, 1822, in *The Founders’ Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, vol. 1, *Major Themes* (Liberty Fund, 2000), <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html>.

² Jeffrey Adam Sachs, Amy Reid, and Jonathan Friedman, *Expanding the Web of Control: America’s Censored Campuses 2025* (PEN America, 2026), <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-campuses-25-web-of-control/>.

³ Katrin Kinzelbach, Staffan I. Lindberg, Lars Lott, and Angelo Vito Panaro, *Academic Freedom Index—Update 2026* (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and V-Dem Institute, 2026), https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2026.pdf.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “US Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises from Recent Low,” Gallup, July 16, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>;

Kim Parker, “Growing Share of Americans Say the US Higher Education System Is Headed in the Wrong Direction,” Pew Research Center, October 15, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/15/growing-share-of-americans-say-the-us-higher-education-system-is-headed-in-the-wrong-direction/>; Kim Parker, “The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education,” Pew Research Center, August 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/>.

⁵ David J. Weerts, “From Covenant to Contract: Changing Conceptions of Public Research Universities in American Society,” *Good Society* 25, nos. 2–3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.5325/goodsociety.25.2-3.0182>; Inka Bormann and René John, “Trust in the Education System—Thoughts on a Fragile Bridge into the Future,” *European Journal of Futures Research* 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40309-013-0035-0>.

This is a challenging moment for higher education leaders, who may feel paralyzed by moral distress or trapped in an endless cycle of institutional decline.⁶ In response to internal and external pressures, some leaders have doubled down on the fraying financial and academic status quo, seeking to keep off the government’s radar and preserve as much of what makes their campuses viable as possible. Others have proactively embraced the administration’s criticisms of higher education, agreeing to government restrictions on academic freedom, shared governance, and college and university autonomy.

A focus on public trust represents a better way forward.

This report outlines a framework—the **Trust Agenda**—for how campus leaders and their allies can advance public trust in American colleges and universities. The Trust Agenda rejects false choices between resistance and accommodation, between autonomy and reform. It also rejects the idea of “rebuilding” trust, as though a return to the status quo would solve all problems between colleges and the public. Instead, it offers a proactive vision of a trusted higher education sector that is more effective, more agile, more inclusive, more in tune with the communities it serves, and more resilient in the face of political pressure. It provides guidance for colleges and universities of all types, and it is intended to be generative rather than prescriptive—to start a conversation rather than to finish it.

The Trust Agenda consists of five practical, effective, and financially and politically feasible

recommendations that can be adapted to the needs and circumstances of any campus. It combines internal reform, external communications, and coordinated defense. The unifying theme behind its recommendations is the goal of improving connections—between campuses and their communities, among students, faculty, staff, and administrators at colleges and universities, and across institutions and institution types. If embraced and implemented by higher education’s leaders and defenders, this framework can build a new twenty-first-century social contract between higher education and the public.⁷

The Trust Agenda

1. Accelerate Innovation
2. Prioritize Community Engagement
3. Recommit to Inclusive Excellence
4. Tell a Clearer Story
5. Coordinate a Mission-Centered Defense

⁶ Andrew Jameton, “What Moral Distress in Nursing History Could Suggest about the Future of Health Care,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 19, no. 6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1001/journalofethics.2017.19.6.mhst1-1706>; Lynn Pasquerella, *What We Value: Public Health, Social Justice, and Educating for Democracy* (University of Virginia Press, 2022).

⁷ Emily J. Levine and Mitchell L. Stevens, “Negotiating the Academic Social Contract,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 54, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2022.2006562>.

What Is Public Trust?

Advancing public trust in higher education requires first making decisions about what public trust means and what it looks like.

There is no universal definition of public trust in higher education, or in any other type of institution. People can place trust in systems, institutions, or interpersonal relationships, in competence or motives.⁸ The US Supreme Court even created a public trust doctrine in 1892.⁹ Meanwhile, the long-running Gallup poll showing a decline in public support for colleges and universities does not even ask about trust, using the term “confidence” instead.¹⁰

For the purposes of this report, we use the following working definition:

Public trust in higher education is a dynamic of the relationship between colleges and universities and the public. Institutions and their representatives foster public trust by demonstrating their trustworthiness consistently through effective actions that promote the public good.

Real trust is an outcome that must be earned; to earn trust, leaders and institutions need to be worthy of it.¹¹ The key ingredients of trust are a sustained cultivation of relationships and a pattern of trustworthy actions over time: promises made and promises kept.

Consider an American institution that still inspires a high level of public trust, even in today’s low-trust climate: the local fire department. Every encounter with someone from the fire department, from the chief to the newest trainee, shows the public an agency unified under a consistent mission and devoted to the public good—that is, to carrying out actions that benefit the public and that the public wants. Most fire departments spend only modestly on public relations; their work itself, and its visibility in the community, is its own best advertisement.

The missions of colleges and universities are complex and contested, and we cannot expect everyone at a college to be aligned on every issue. But for higher education to earn more public trust, colleges and universities, and their leaders, will need to demonstrate consistently a shared purpose and a commitment to the public good.

Institutions and their representatives foster public trust by demonstrating their trustworthiness consistently through effective actions that promote the public good.

⁸ Joanne Hawkins, “Tangled Webs of Trust: A Study of Public Trust in Risk Regulation,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 44, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqae006>; Oliver Schilke, Martin Reimann, and Karen S. Cook, “Trust in Social Relations,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 47 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-082120-082850>.
⁹ Joseph L. Sax, “The Public Trust Doctrine in Natural Resource Law: Effective Judicial Intervention,” *68 Michigan Law Review* 68, no. 3 (1970), <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol68/iss3/3>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey M. Jones, “US Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises from Recent Low,” Gallup, July 16, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>.
¹¹ Onora O’Neill and David Omand, *Trustworthiness in Public Life: National Resilience*, COMEC Occasional Paper, No. 11 (2018), <https://www.comec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/COMEC-Occasional-Paper-No-11.pdf>.

Behaviors of High-Trust Leaders

Leadership is a critical part of building public trust. In *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, Stephen Covey and Rebecca Merrill identify thirteen behaviors of high-trust leaders that include both character-based and competence-based actions.

- 1. Talk Straight:** Tell the truth in simple language.
- 2. Demonstrate Respect:** Show you care about the dignity of all people.
- 3. Create Transparency:** Be open and authentic.
- 4. Right Wrongs:** Admit mistakes and make restitution.
- 5. Show Loyalty:** Share credit and represent others fairly.
- 6. Deliver Results:** Be responsible and accountable to your promises.
- 7. Get Better:** Engage in continuous improvement and lifelong learning.
- 8. Confront Reality:** Acknowledge tough truths and the previously unsaid.
- 9. Clarify Expectations:** Disclose and be specific about your expectations.
- 10. Practice Accountability.** Hold yourself and others responsible for results.
- 11. Listen First:** Listen to understand before you speak.
- 12. Keep Commitments:** Do what you say and keep others' confidences.
- 13. Extend Trust:** Believe that others deserve your trust.

When leaders of institutions consistently demonstrate these behaviors, they can build and maintain trust in the institutions they lead.¹²

¹² Stephen M. R. Covey and Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (Free Press, 2006).

Higher Education in the Twentieth Century

How did the American higher education sector reach this moment of crisis?

For much of the United States' first two centuries, a college education was mostly the province of the elite, not part of the common American dream. That was true despite the growth of private religious colleges, land-grant agricultural and mechanical colleges, and historically Black colleges and universities.¹³ On the eve of World War II, fewer than 5 percent of Americans held a college degree.¹⁴

Change came quickly during and after the war. The GI Bill, passed in 1944, made higher education a lived and attainable reality for millions of Americans; 2.2 million World War II veterans enrolled in college using financial aid from the GI Bill, and several renewals extended these subsidies to other veterans and non-veterans.¹⁵

At the same time, Vannevar Bush's 1945 report, *Science: The Endless Frontier*, laid out a vision of federally supported research universities as engines of scientific innovation central to the United States' global standing and national security.¹⁶ Crucially, that vision focused on investments in basic research—"the free play of free intellects," as Bush put it, "working on subjects of their own choice, in the manner dictated by their curiosity"—while perhaps undervaluing research that was embedded more directly in societal and community needs.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Bush's report inspired the establishment of the National Science Foundation and a significant expansion of federal research funding at colleges and universities.

Declaring that "education is indispensable to the maintenance and growth of freedom of thought, faith, enterprise, and association," the 1947 Truman Commission report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, called for a universal system of free community colleges and increased federal student aid for four-year degrees.¹⁸ While not all of the report's recommendations were adopted, state-level investment led to the dramatic growth of community colleges and regional public universities, while federal financial subsidies for low-income students (now known as Pell Grants) first became a reality in 1965 and expanded over the next few decades.¹⁹ The commission's recommendations that colleges and universities be racially desegregated and provide equal opportunity for women students became increasingly real after passage of the Civil Rights Act and Title IX, respectively, further opening the door for previously excluded Americans to access higher education.

By the 1970s, higher education had become a realistic possibility for middle- and working-class Americans—an opportunity that held the promise of significant economic and social mobility. Many Americans took advantage of that opportunity. As of 2024, nearly 55 percent of Americans held a post-high school credential, including over one-third with a four-year degree. 43.6 percent had a "credential of value," meaning they both held a degree or certification and made a salary 15 percent or more above the average high school graduate.²⁰

¹³ Carrie B. Kisker and Arthur M. Cohen, *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System*, 3rd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2024); Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, "How They Did It: Exposing How US Universities Profited from Indigenous Land," Pulitzer Center, May 19, 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-they-did-it-exposing-how-us-universities-profited-indigenous-land>.

¹⁴ US Census Bureau, "Highest Educational Levels Reached by Adults in the US Since 1940," March 30, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-51.html>.

¹⁵ Milton Greenberg, "How the GI Bill Changed Higher Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 2004, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-the-gi-bill-changed-higher-education/>.

¹⁶ Vannevar Bush, *Science, the Endless Frontier: A Report to the President on a Program for Postwar Scientific Research* (orig. pub. July 1945; National Science Foundation, 2023), https://nsf.gov-resources.nsf.gov/2023-04/EndlessFrontier75th_w.pdf.

¹⁷ Daniel Sarewitz, "Saving Science," *The New Atlantis*, Spring/Summer 2016, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/saving-science>.

¹⁸ George F. Zook et al., *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education* (Harper and Brothers, 1947), <https://web.archive.org/web/20100617034636/http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/courses/eol474/sp98/truman.html>.

¹⁹ Higher Education Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-329, 79 Stat. 1219 (1965), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-765/pdf/COMPS-765.pdf>.

²⁰ "Credentials of Value," A Stronger Nation, Lumina Foundation, <https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/credentials-of-value>.

What Went Wrong?

Why is higher education in such a challenging position today? Many factors have led to the current crisis of public trust. While some are specific to higher education, others are common across sectors and even across countries.

Many of the challenges specific to higher education have to do with funding. Over the past few decades, the funding model for higher education has eroded. State governments, which had been the largest funding sources for most public universities, began shrinking their subsidies in the late twentieth century. Cuts accelerated during the Great Recession as states scrambled to balance their budgets.²¹ At the same time, higher administrative costs, including necessary and transformational investments in advising, tutoring, and student success staff, along with mandatory staffing needs to meet new federal requirements, increased colleges' and universities' costs per student. Compounding the problem, a steady decline in enrollments over the past fifteen years has further reduced revenue for many institutions.²²

This money squeeze has resulted in higher tuition prices for students, more student debt, and—for many underresourced institutions—stagnation in faculty hiring, course offerings, and support services, along with an increase in campus closures. Some colleges and universities have responded by adopting market-oriented practices, such as competitive prestige-seeking through rankings and costly amenities, that drive up costs

further and accelerate recruitment competition among institutions.

In the late twentieth century, good-paying jobs for high school graduates began to decline, while income inequality rose, effectively sorting many Americans into haves and have-nots based on whether they held a college degree.²³ More recently, degree holders themselves have begun to face a more difficult job market after graduation, leading students and graduates to question the return on investment a degree brings.²⁴

Financial factors are only part of the explanation. Higher education has also been swept up in a global decline in public trust in institutions of all types.²⁵ That decline has many causes, including heightened political and economic polarization and a global epidemic of loneliness.²⁶ This general public alienation from the social fabric of institutions has contributed to the rise of political authoritarianism worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global trust crisis, including in higher education. Like K-12 schools, many colleges and universities struggled with a lack of transparency and clear decision-making. They shifted quickly to virtual delivery systems without enough support for struggling students, faculty, and staff, and they created inconsistent and ever-changing policies about reopening, masking, and vaccinations.²⁷ As public views on pandemic policy fragmented along

²¹ Jennifer A. Delaney and William R. Doyle, "Patterns and Volatility in State Funding for Higher Education, 1951–2006," *Teachers College Record* 120, no. 6 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812000605>; Barrett J. Taylor, *Wrecked: Deinstitutionalization and Partial Defenses in State Higher Education Policy* (Rutgers University Press, 2022).

²² Bryan Alexander, *Peak Higher Ed: How to Survive the Looming Academic Crisis* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2026).

²³ Carrie B. Kisker and Arthur M. Cohen, *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System*, 3rd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2024); Will Bunch, *After the Ivory Tower Falls: How College Broke the American Dream and Blew Up Our Politics—and How to Fix It* (William Morrow, 2022).

²⁴ Sydney Ember, "Young Graduates Face the Grimmiest Job Market in Years," *New York Times*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/24/business/economy/college-graduates-job-market-hiring.html>.

²⁵ *Trust in Public Institutions: Trends and Implications for Economic Security*, Policy Brief No. 108 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021), <https://desapublications.un.org/file/18027/download/>.

²⁶ Jacob Harold, *Understanding the Crisis in Institutional Trust* (Urban Institute, 2024), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/Understanding_the_Crisis_in_Institutional_Trust.pdf.

²⁷ Kaleb L. Briscoe, Evangela Q. Oates, Brittany Washington, and LaWanda W. M. Ward, "Experiencing Harm and Betrayal: Black Staff Members' Narratives During the Height and Ongoing Wake of COVID-19," *Journal of Higher Education* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2605870>.

political and cultural lines, college and university policy choices became entangled in these divisions and fed polarized views of the sector.

Finally, just as with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, social progress and social justice movements in the twenty-first century, including the Black Lives Matter movement and the George

Floyd protests in 2020, have prompted a political backlash. This backlash has been global and has targeted a broad swath of society, but in the United States, it has focused in particular on higher education, whose visible commitment to diversity initiatives and weakened standing with the public have made it an easy political target.

Exploiting the Crisis

For the past six years, political actors have exploited the public's lack of trust in higher education to advance their own agenda at the expense of the American system of higher learning.

Beginning in 2021, an avalanche of state laws, many of them written by staff at national think tanks like the Manhattan Institute and the Heritage Foundation, attacked the principles of academic freedom, college and university autonomy, and shared governance. At first, these laws focused on banning from college classrooms a list of so-called “divisive concepts” regarding race, gender, identity, and American history. These early classroom restrictions, however, ran into legal and constitutional challenges.²⁸

In 2023, these political actors pivoted toward a broader set of restrictions on college and university autonomy and shared governance, including government-imposed limits on general education curricula, faculty tenure, public programming, accreditation agencies, and the

authority of faculty senates. Most significantly, an increasing number of states banned diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and programs at public colleges and universities.²⁹ Opponents of DEI claimed that these initiatives, created to address systemic inequality and increase completion rates for students from underserved groups, were in fact promoting racism by engaging with students based on their identities rather than as individuals.³⁰

That is not an accurate assessment of what DEI programs do or how they work.³¹ Nevertheless, some state governments continued to enact restrictions on college campuses, including through “jawboning”—verbal threats that bring about the desired changes without the need for formal legislation.³² Meanwhile, widespread campus protests in the spring of 2024 deepened mistrust among students, faculty, and administrators; opponents of higher education seized on scenes of campus conflict to paint higher education as out of control and in need of a heavy government hand.

²⁸ Jonathan Friedman and James Tager, *Educational Gag Orders: Legislative Restrictions on the Freedom to Read, Learn, and Teach* (PEN America, 2021), <https://pen.org/report/educational-gag-orders/>; Jeremy C. Young, Jeffrey Adam Sachs, and Jonathan Friedman, *America's Censored Classrooms 2022* (PEN America, 2022), <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms/>.

²⁹ Kaleb L. Briscoe, *Dismantling DEI in Higher Education: An Analysis of How Diversity Professionals View Political Bans* (University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, 2024), <https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/fellows-23-24/dismantling-dei-in-higher-education-an-analysis-of-how-diversity-professionals-view-political-bans/>; Kaleb L. Briscoe, “Navigating the Threats to Democracy: Diversity Professionals’ Narratives of Political Polarization, Legislation, and Public Opinion,”

Innovative Higher Education (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-026-09908-2>.

³⁰ Jeffrey Adam Sachs and Jeremy C. Young, *America's Censored Classrooms 2023: Lawmakers Shift Strategies as Resistance Rises* (PEN America, 2023), <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2023/>.

³¹ Shaun Harper et al., *Truths About DEI on College Campuses: Evidence-Based Expert Responses to Politicized Misinformation* (University of Southern California Race and Equity Center, 2024), <https://race.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Harper-and-Associates-DEI-Truths-Report.pdf>.

³² Jeffrey Adam Sachs and Jeremy C. Young, *America's Censored Classrooms 2024: Refining the Art of Censorship* (PEN America, 2024), <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2024/>.

After taking office in January 2025, the current federal administration accelerated and nationalized these tactics. It issued an avalanche of executive orders, letters, and lawsuits banning DEI and accusing DEI initiatives at various universities of violating civil rights law. The government also made devastating financial cuts to college and university research budgets, canceling grants it considered (often on dubious evidence) to be DEI related, and suspending funding for entire institutions.³³

In October 2025, the Department of Education wrote to nine universities, inviting them to sign a “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education” written by the government in exchange for increased access to federal funding in the future.³⁴ While no campus has signed to date, the message was clear: The federal government was planning to wield the

power of the purse to force a broad swath of policy changes on campuses across the country.

Many of the specific state and federal campus restrictions in recent years poll relatively poorly and are not accurate reflections of the public’s complaints about colleges and universities. Complying with them will not address the public’s real and legitimate concerns with higher education.³⁵

Campuses should reject the demands of bad-faith actors while acknowledging that those demands are plausible only because public trust in the sector is weak. Rather than treating the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education” as a road map, colleges should consider it a red flag: Higher education needs to implement its own path forward, or it risks being dragged backward by outside authorities.

Modeling Public Trust

Public trust in higher education has declined for a multitude of reasons, many of them systemic and beyond the power of individual campus leaders. No matter how visionary or well run, no campus can single-handedly solve the problem of declining public funding for higher education or reverse the global trend toward distrust in institutions.

Nevertheless, some colleges and universities have managed to transcend these forces and forge a path to public trust. They are just not the campuses that dominate national news.

In a December 2024 Data for Progress survey, most Americans reported having a favorable

opinion of colleges and universities. The results, however, differed greatly by institution type. Most survey respondents had a favorable opinion of community colleges and trade or technical colleges, and many had a positive view of public colleges and universities. Liberal arts colleges scored lower. Ivy League universities brought up the rear, with fewer than half of Americans expressing favorable views of them.³⁶

American higher education faces a strange paradox: Our most selective and well-resourced institutions are the least popular with the public, while our least-resourced colleges—those that educate the majority of students in the United

³³ Jeffrey Adam Sachs, Amy Reid, and Jonathan Friedman, *Expanding the Web of Control: America’s Censored Campuses 2025* (PEN America, 2026), <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-campuses-25-web-of-control/>.

³⁴ “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” October 1, 2025, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Compact-for-Academic-Excellence-in-Higher-Education-10.1.pdf>.

³⁵ Brian Kennedy and Emma Kikuchi, “Do Americans Think the Country Is Losing or Gaining Ground in Science?,” Pew Research Center, January 15, 2026,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2026/01/15/do-americans-think-the-country-is-losing-or-gaining-ground-in-science/>; “Few Support Punitive Funding Cuts to Colleges and Universities,” AP-NORC, May 9, 2025, <https://apnorc.org/projects/few-support-punitive-funding-cuts-to-colleges-and-universities/>.

³⁶ William Diep, “Voters Have a Favorable View of Higher Education, but Think It Has Become Too Expensive to Attend College,” Data for Progress, December 18, 2024, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2024/12/18/voters-have-a-favorable-view-of-higher-education-but-think-it-has-become-too-expensive-to-attend-college>.

States—fare much better³⁷. Advancing public trust in higher education requires learning from the institutions that are most successful at building that trust.

Community colleges are different from four-year institutions in a variety of ways, and some of

their successful strategies may not apply to other institution types. Nevertheless, before turning to the report's recommendations, we conclude this section with a look at one community college that has transcended the forces that undermine trust and forged a path to community connection.

Bunker Hill Community College

In Boston, a city that boasts such storied institutions as Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Bunker Hill Community College often escapes national attention. Massachusetts' largest public two-year higher education institution, whose main campus nestles in the shadow of Interstate 93 on the site of a former prison, serves thirteen thousand students, most of whom live within a ten-mile radius of the college. The student population is the most racially diverse in the continental United States. According to the college's internal figures, 54 percent of students are food insecure and 14 percent are unhoused.

When Bunker Hill students talk about their institution, they demonstrate a love of and commitment to the college that few campuses can match. At Bunker Hill, “they see you and they hear you,” says one student. “It’s so easy to connect with faculty and with management of Bunker Hill. . . . A lot of times . . . you feel like you’re home.”³⁸ “All of my friends go to universities,” says another, “and there’s definitely a difference I’ve noticed, that they don’t get the support that I get at Bunker Hill. They do everything on their own, and people struggle a lot.” Bunker Hill, reports a third, does not “make the students feel they’re suffering alone. Because that’s the worst thing that could happen, to feel like you have to deal with everything [on your own].”

Some of this positive community culture grows from a suite of wraparound supports the campus provides for students, including an always-stocked food pantry, institution-wide adoption of the Guided Pathways framework for integrating academics and student success, and carefully cultivated relationships with surrounding neighborhoods through branch campuses.³⁹ The flagship initiative among these efforts is Community Connect, a student success program funded by the state of Massachusetts that includes a group of student Peer Connectors who reach out to students who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

Some of the college's sense of community, though, comes from the leadership culture itself. Administrators walking through campus are frequently stopped by students, security, guards, and faculty, who recognize them as allies in advancing the college's student-centered mission.

“At Bunker Hill, it’s our responsibility to be student ready, not for the student to be college ready,” explains Community Connect director Misael Carrasquillo. “We’re focused on building relationships with our students, because it’s the trust we have with our students that makes things work.” A Bunker Hill alumnus himself, Carrasquillo says, “Bunker Hill taught me how to advocate for myself and for my

³⁷ “Community College Facts at a Glance,” US Department of Education, <https://www.ed.gov/higher-education/find-college-or-educational-program/community-college/community-college-facts-glance>; Cecilia M. Orphan and Mac Wetherbee, *Regional Public Universities: Expanding Higher Education's ROI for Students and Communities* (Third Way, 2025), <https://www.thirdway.org/report/regional-public-universities-expanding-higher-educations-roi-for-students-and-communities>.

³⁸ Observations and quotes are drawn from a March 25, 2026, campus visit by AAC&U staff.

³⁹ “Guided Pathways,” Community College Research Center, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research/guided-pathways.html>.

family. And because of that, I have the ability to teach others to advocate for themselves too.”

Bunker Hill president Pam Eddinger, who has led the college for thirteen years, has many thoughts on what has worked so well on her campus. (Eddinger is also the 2026 chair of AAC&U’s board of directors.) “One person or one layer of the college cannot build community trust; it has to be built with all the layers. And the most important part of trust is the students.” They are the college’s best advertising and, after they graduate, its greatest recruiters and ambassadors.

To campus leaders, Eddinger offers this advice: “Know who your students are—not just their name, but . . . you need to know the person.” Rather than expecting students to acculturate to campus life as many institutions do, colleges should meet their students where they are. “The difference between those two ethoses is the difference between whether you trust and whether you don’t trust.”

According to Eddinger, nimbleness and innovation are the final components of Bunker Hill’s success. “The community colleges have always had to scramble,” Eddinger continues. But a result of that scramble “is the development of a piece of DNA where iteration, change, dancing really fast and doing it with no money, and being student focused have always been at the core of what we are.”

Private research institutions “are the stewards of knowledge, . . . but community colleges are of the moment, of the living. It’s going to take [research institutions] a thousand years to turn around that Titanic. . . . But we’re in a sailboat.”

Bunker Hill is far from the only institution that has succeeded in advancing public trust in higher education in this challenging moment. There are some key principles on display at Bunker Hill that can be applied to campuses of all shapes and sizes: humility and respect for local communities, clarity of purpose and mission, a nimble and collaborative campus culture, and the generous welcome offered to students from all backgrounds.

The rest of this report will outline the five recommendations of the Trust Agenda, adapting the successful strategies of many campuses into a framework for advancing public trust in higher education.

There are some key principles on display at Bunker Hill that can be applied to campuses of all shapes and sizes: humility and respect for local communities, clarity of purpose and mission, a nimble and collaborative campus culture, and the generous welcome offered to students from all backgrounds.



Recommendation One: Accelerate Innovation

American colleges and universities are often resistant to change. As former Macalester College president Brian Rosenberg writes, “This industry that ostensibly fosters growth and transformation in its students just cannot seem to change or transform itself in ways beyond the incremental.”⁴⁰

In order to trust colleges and universities, the public must be able to see and believe that campuses can innovate—that they can solve their own problems, embrace and implement improvements, and do those things quickly, effectively, proactively, and voluntarily. Derek Thompson and Ezra Klein call this an “abundance” approach: removing unnecessary regulatory burdens and red tape and making it easier to accomplish shared goals.⁴¹

Colleges need to embrace what AAC&U has termed the “agility imperative”—a shared

commitment to accelerate innovation and embrace change.⁴² None of the other recommendations in this report can come to pass unless change itself is possible on campus.

The public must be able to see and believe that campuses can innovate—effectively, proactively, and voluntarily.

⁴⁰ Brian Rosenberg, *Whatever It Is, I’m Against It: Resistance to Change in Higher Education* (Harvard Education Press, 2023), x–xi.

⁴¹ Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance* (Avid Reader Press, 2025).

⁴² Ashley P. Finley, *The Agility Imperative: How Employers View Preparation for an Uncertain Future* (AAC&U, 2025), <https://dgm81phhv63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/AgilityImperative2025.pdf>.

The Innovative Campus

Most college and university leaders now recognize that nimbleness, adaptability, an entrepreneurial spirit, and the ability to change and innovate are key skills for graduates navigating an ever-changing economy. Campuses are also increasingly investing in innovation offices and initiatives that focus on solving problems in the wider community, like improving health care information systems, increasing affordable housing options, and designing solutions for city governance.

Just as colleges are working to create conditions that enable innovation for students and communities, they should use the same tools to encourage innovation in their own processes and procedures, both at the sector level and on individual campuses.

Instead of reacting to events as they happen, colleges and universities have an opportunity to transform themselves proactively and intentionally in ways that better fulfill higher education's mission and ideals.

Higher education leaders and practitioners have developed many proposals for improving student success, research output, community relations, fiscal affairs, and more. Many of these plans enjoy broad support across the higher education sector but remain stalled by the inability of campuses to bring about change in a coordinated way.

Examples include making it easier to transfer credits from one institution to another, better coordinating “promise programs” that provide free community college access to low- and middle-income families, building and sustaining “buy local” initiatives that help campuses invest in local communities, strengthening technology transfer systems that move technological innovations from university-based research teams to private-sector partners, and exploring three-year bachelor's degrees in some fields.⁴³ These and other proposals would benefit from a coordinated, whole-sector commitment to accelerating innovation.

While the lack of coordination among institutions gets in the way of sector-wide change, innovation at the campus level turns the decentralized nature of the higher education sector into an advantage, making individual colleges and universities laboratories of possibility for improving higher education as a whole. For colleges and universities, these campus- and system-level innovations are the most important. Their smaller scale makes them more likely to succeed, and they can build trust locally by making colleges more responsive to campus and community needs.

Higher education is in the midst of a profound disruption, and change is unavoidable. Instead of reacting to events as they happen, colleges and universities have an opportunity to transform themselves proactively and intentionally in ways that better fulfill higher education's mission and ideals.⁴⁴

⁴³ Betsy Mueller, Emily Tichenor, Martin Kurzweil, and Alexandra W. Logue, “Providing Credit Transfer Visibility to Improve Credit Mobility,” Ithaka S+R, February 22, 2024, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/providing-credit-transfer-visibility-to-improve-credit-mobility/>; Johanna Alonso, “Colleges Hope Tuition Guarantees Will Open Doors to Lower-Income Students,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/financial-aid/2025/09/25/new-promise-programs-launch-families-making->

[under-100k](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/04/07/can-three-year-bachelors-degree-become-reality); Josh Moody, “The Push for a 3-Year Bachelor's Degree,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/04/07/can-three-year-bachelors-degree-become-reality>.

⁴⁴ Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt, *From Upheaval to Action: What Works in Changing Higher Ed* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2026).

Trust In Action: Brandeis University



In September 2025, Brandeis University president Arthur Levine launched “The Brandeis Plan to Reinvent the Liberal Arts.” The plan commits Brandeis, a well-resourced private research university, to a type of activity more common at community colleges and regional public universities: building career readiness skills into the four-year curriculum from day one. Students will be matched with both academic and career advisors, will complete a required internship or apprenticeship, and will graduate with a “second transcript” that documents their applied learning

alongside their academic courses. A new on-campus Center for Careers and Applied Liberal Arts will centralize and coordinate the plan.⁴⁵

Despite the abrupt nature of these changes, which included a realignment of the institution’s academic divisions, Levine was able to win the support of faculty through frequent one-on-one meetings where they discussed the university’s situation and vision for change. In a secret ballot of all faculty, 88 percent voted in favor of the Brandeis Plan.⁴⁶

Trust In Action: The EdgeMarket Cooperative Pricing System



All colleges and universities use technology to deliver on their missions, but procuring—and affording—technology solutions can pose challenges for many campuses. Based in New Jersey, the nonprofit EdgeMarket Cooperative Pricing System works on behalf of higher education institutions across the country to secure favorable pricing on technology products that meet the specific needs of higher education.

Networks like this simplify the purchasing process for individual colleges and universities and increase their collective purchasing power.⁴⁷ This innovative collaboration among campuses solves a problem for colleges and allows them to focus their time and money on their own students and communities.

Shared Governance and Innovation

The principle of shared governance is central to the American system of higher education. It is also central to campus innovation, because it can be either a big help or a big obstacle to creating change at colleges and universities.

The 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, written by a coalition of higher education associations, outlined a framework for shared governance. Under that framework, major decisions about a college’s future are made by

⁴⁵ “The Brandeis Plan to Reinvent the Liberal Arts,” Brandeis University, <https://www.brandeis.edu/plan/>.

⁴⁶ Joe Sallustio, host, *The EdUp Experience* podcast, episode 426 of president series, “Why 88% of Faculty Voted to Blow Up the Liberal Arts Model (& How Your Institution Can

Too)—with Dr. Arthur Levine, Brandeis University,” November 24, 2025, <https://play.headliner.app/podcast/03bf79b9d21d435b846906e538322cf0/episode/95e352c7-6703-4886-ada7-b39829210edc>.

the institution’s board, president, and faculty. The three groups have more or less authority over certain areas of decision-making. Governing boards control the budget, presidents manage policy, and faculty oversee curriculum.⁴⁸ Today, a culture of shared governance means that the rest of the community is also recognized and invited to participate, including staff, administrators, students, and community members.

Restoring trust in one another—among students, staff, faculty, administrators, and governing boards—is a prerequisite for restoring public trust in higher education.

Done well, shared governance builds legitimacy and draws on the ideas and wisdom of the whole campus community. Done poorly, though, shared governance becomes a hindrance to innovation. It creates too many chances for some to obstruct ideas proposed by others, and too few opportunities to lift up good ideas and put them into practice. This ineffective version of shared governance too often leads to gridlock and stagnation, or to presidents and governing boards overriding or weakening shared governance to push through their preferred changes.

As Marc Dunkelman writes, American democratic institutions are often torn between two competing impulses. Centralizing authority in a few powerful hands enables quick and efficient progress, but also gives rise to authoritarian overreach. Creating complex regulations to constrain authorities protects the power of individuals and community input, but also generates a “vetocracy” where too many people can block new ideas and projects.⁴⁹ To be successful, Dunkelman argues, democratic

institutions need to “balance . . . individual rights with the broader public interest”—restraining unaccountable authority figures while also wielding power efficiently to get things done.⁵⁰

That balance between efficiency and community input is essential for campus governance. In an effective shared governance system, it should be as easy for faculty and other campus constituents to start something good as it is for them to stop something bad. Although effective shared governance solicits input and gives faculty and other groups opportunities to challenge egregiously unfair or destructive plans from leadership, most of the time a final decision-maker is empowered to act. Importantly, that decision-maker is not always the president; presidents do not have a monopoly on good judgment or good ideas, and a working governance system distributes authority across campus.⁵¹ But in the end, someone can always render a final judgment and move forward.

At the same time, effective shared governance focuses as much on developing new, streamlined processes to elevate and implement good ideas as it does on creating challenge points for bad ideas. Rather than treating shared governance as simply a rearguard defense of the status quo, faculty as well as staff, students, and alumni can use it to bring forth their own exciting, innovative plans for the campus.

Shared governance is successful when all members of the campus community recognize the value of balancing the power to veto with the power to innovate, adopt processes that share those powers equitably, and have reason to trust that other stakeholders value these processes, too. Restoring trust in one another—among students, staff, faculty, administrators, and governing boards—is a prerequisite for restoring public trust in higher education.

⁴⁷ “American Association of Colleges and Universities: Extending Liberal Education to All Students,” *View from the Edge*, Summer/Fall 2024, <https://www.flipsnack.com/njedge/vfte-summer-fall2024-vol-13/full-view.html>.

⁴⁸ American Association of University Professors, American Council on Education, and Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 1966, <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/topical-reports/statement-government-colleges-and>.

⁴⁹ Marc J. Dunkelman, *Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress—and How to Bring It Back* (PublicAffairs, 2025).

⁵⁰ Marc J. Dunkelman, “What the Left Could Learn from Trump’s Brutal Efficiency,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/03/opinion/trump-liberals-government.html>.

⁵¹ Freeman A. Hrabowski III, Philip J. Rous, and Peter H. Henderson, *The Empowered University: Shared Leadership, Culture Change, and Academic Success* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

Trust In Action: James Madison University



In 2023, a joint faculty-administrator task force at James Madison University published a helpful list of shared governance indicators for its campus. “Shared governance can be assessed as healthy and successful when the following norms and practices are present,” they wrote, offering items that could prove relevant to other institutions of higher education:

Collaboration and shared responsibility among administrators, faculty, and governing board members.

Open, clear, and consistent communication across all relevant groups.

Efforts that demonstrate good faith in advancing the university’s academic mission and core values.

A commitment to fostering a culture of trust, mutual respect, and accountability within the [university] community.

Accessible information that supports transparency in decision-making processes.

Inclusive practices that engage administrators, faculty members, staff, and students.

A shared understanding of roles and responsibilities, especially related to stakeholder dominance, primacy, and joint authority.

A commitment to enriching decision-making by seeking input from a broad range of [university] community members.⁵²



⁵² “Shared Governance at JMU,” James Madison University, <https://www.jmu.edu/academic-affairs/shared-governance/index.shtml>.

Affordability and Innovation

A key driver of distrust in higher education is a lack of affordability, and colleges and universities must find ways to address this critical issue. While affordability is a complex problem, accelerating innovation pathways at colleges and universities is a key part of the solution.

Over the last three decades, after adjusting for inflation, the average published sticker price that prospective students and their families see has doubled.⁵³ State financial disinvestment, increased services and support for students, and expensive competition among institutions have all helped to drive this trend. The practice of “discounting” has also become widespread, especially at private colleges, leading the institutions to advertise tuition rates much higher than what most students actually pay, while quietly offering big discounts or even free tuition to the majority of each incoming class.⁵⁴ The discounting process benefits individual campuses by generating revenue and aiding in recruitment, but it makes the process of calculating the actual price frustrating and opaque for students and their families, even as financial aid reduces the cost for most applicants.⁵⁵ “From the perspective of building public trust,” wrote the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education in a recent report, “it would be hard to design a more ineffective system.”⁵⁶

Adjusted for inflation, federal student grant aid has decreased by 7 percent over the past decade, with sharp declines in both Pell Grant funding and veterans’ educational benefits.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, student loan debt is now the second-largest consumer debt

category after mortgage debt—although those student debt figures are fueled largely by increases in graduate student borrowing, as undergraduate student borrowing declined over the same period.⁵⁸

These are the numbers the public sees and responds to. For most prospective students, college is still a good investment, yielding positive returns in lifetime earnings, social mobility, health outcomes, and civic and community engagement.⁵⁹ But that fact is too often lost in the din of questions about why college costs so much, the complexity of the college funding model, and the staggering dollars and cents involved. There are real failures too. Public trust in the value of college erodes with every noncompletion, loan default, and unsuccessful post-graduation job hunt, or when a student avoids college altogether because of a misunderstanding about how much it costs, or has to drop out because the full cost was not made clear up front.

Barring the reappearance of more public funding for higher education, the affordability crisis has no easy solution. But embracing innovation and connection can help. Campuses can work together to be more honest with the public about the real cost of college, advertising tuition rates more in line with actual prices and embracing a system of price transparency that makes it clear to students and their families exactly how much they will pay while earning a degree or certification, why they will pay that amount, and how much students are likely to benefit by graduating.⁶⁰ A new set of “Student-Centered Enrollment Management

⁵³ Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025* (College Board, 2025), https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-in-College-Pricing-and-Student-Aid-2025-final_1.pdf.

⁵⁴ “NACUBO Study Finds Private Colleges and Universities Are Offering Record Financial Aid to Students,” National Association of College and University Business Officers, June 24, 2025, <https://www.nacubo.org/Press-Releases/2025/NACUBO-Study-Finds-Private-Colleges-and-Universities-Are-Offering-Record-Financial-Aid-to-Students>.

⁵⁵ Rachel Fishman, “Ending Surprise Bills in Higher Education,” *New America*, October 9, 2025, <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/ending-surprise-bills-in-higher-education/>.

⁵⁶ Julia Adams et al., *Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education* (Yale University, 2026), 11, <https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2026-04/Report-of-the-Committee-on-Trust-in-Higher-Education.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025* (College Board, 2025), https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-in-College-Pricing-and-Student-Aid-2025-final_1.pdf.

⁵⁸ “10 Key Facts About Student Debt in the United States,” Peter G. Peterson Foundation, December 20, 2024, <https://www.pgpf.org/article/10-key-facts-about-student-debt-in-the-united-states/>.

⁵⁹ Charles L. Welch, “A College Degree Remains the Best Investment for Future Success,” *Forbes*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charleswelch/2025/03/13/a-college-degree-remains-the-best-investment-for-future-success/>.

⁶⁰ “College Cost,” *New America*, December 1, 2013, <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/college-cost/>.

Principles”—developed by a committee of experts, coordinated by Strada Education Foundation, and endorsed by many associations of financial aid and student success professionals—is an excellent step in the right direction.⁶¹

Meanwhile, the best ideas for solving the affordability problem are likely to bubble up from individual

campuses that take risks and try new things. Colleges should be innovative in their approach to pricing, experimental in their efforts to cut costs and improve efficiency, open to tactics like price reductions and abandoning the high price/high discount model, and willing to borrow successful ideas from their peers. The one thing colleges cannot afford to do about affordability is nothing at all.

Strategies to Consider

- Identify gaps between how a campus currently functions and how it should function. Pinpoint the choke points that stifle innovation and change, and develop solutions to streamline these processes.
- Encourage innovation by creating innovation hubs—separate sandbox environments on campus where new ideas can be piloted and tested before being considered for institution-wide implementation.⁶² Encourage faculty, staff, administrators, and students to put new ideas forward and to evaluate the ideas of others.
- Revise structures, like faculty hiring and promotion criteria and accreditation standards, to incentivize innovation.
- Consolidate campus innovation efforts under a chief innovation or transformation officer, who is empowered to work across silos that limit innovation opportunities.⁶³
- Establish community exchange programs or incubator labs, where students and faculty can conduct research and provide recommendations to civic and business leaders on pressing problems.
- Take advantage of spaces and conversations hosted by national professional associations to develop new campus innovations. AAC&U’s team-based institutes are one place to kick-start innovation efforts.
- Build communities of practice across institutions. Change at the sector level proceeds best when a group of like-minded institutions work together to try out a new proposal and then recruit additional institutions to the cause. This model may be particularly helpful in addressing issues of cost and affordability.
- Reinvigorate systems of shared governance, examining policies and institutional culture to make sure that shared governance works to advance innovative ideas from every corner of campus while still pumping the brakes on egregious proposals. Assess the health of shared governance regularly based on the outcomes it produces.
- Treat a lack of funding for new ideas as a real obstacle, but not a complete barrier. Not all ideas or projects require significant funding; even small pilot projects can make a positive impact on campus. As the work of Jessica Riddell suggests, the task of higher education in a time of “austerity and scarcity” is to model “abundance, generosity, and hope.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ “Student-Centered Enrollment Management Principles,” Strada Education Foundation, May 6, 2026, <https://www.strada.org/news-insights/student-centered-enrollment-management-principles>.

⁶² Brian Rosenberg, “Change in Higher Education Is Hard, but Not Impossible,” *Times Higher Education*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/change-higher-education-hard-not-impossible>.

⁶³ Jeffrey J. Selingo, *The Rise of the Chief Innovation Officer in Higher Education: The*

Importance of Managing Change on Campus, Entangled Solutions, January 2018, <https://ai.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/The-Rise-of-the-Chief-Innovation-Officer-in-HigherEd.pdf>; Glen Gardner, “The Rise of the University Chief Innovation Officer,” UI Collab/Gardner Innovation Search Partners, October 9, 2024, <https://gardnerisp.com/the-rise-of-the-university-chief-innovation-officer/>.

⁶⁴ Jessica Riddell, *Hope Circuits: Rewiring Universities and Other Organizations for Human Flourishing* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2024), 38, 70.

Recommendation Two: Prioritize Community Engagement

Beginning in 2007, political scientist Katherine Cramer interviewed hundreds of rural Wisconsinites. When she asked them about their perceptions of the University of Wisconsin, many responded by criticizing the campus. To Cramer’s interview subjects, universities and their representatives seemed self-satisfied, extractive, and remote.

One man, for example, had been out fishing when he encountered university researchers. Upon learning that they were studying whether bass spawned in the same place every year, the man told the researchers they could have “just save[d] [themselves] a whole bunch of trouble” had they first spoken to anyone living in the area, as the answer was yes. Recounting this story to Cramer, the man laughed, then added, “They [the researchers] don’t want anything to do with ya. They think they’re smarter than ya.”⁶⁵

To grow trust between the public and higher education, colleges need to foster deep and meaningful relationships with their local communities—to be community assets rather than just cathedrals of learning.⁶⁶

And in a media environment that can bring the foibles of any campus to a national audience, *all* campuses and their representatives need to participate, not just some.

⁶⁵ Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 126.

⁶⁶ Byron P. White, *The Community-Centric Path to Rebuilding Trust in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2026).

The Anchor Institution Model

Community partnerships have long been central to the missions of many land-grant and regional public universities, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions, among others. In 1985, the presidents of Brown, Stanford, and Georgetown Universities created Campus Compact, a coalition of college and university leaders dedicated to helping higher education achieve its public purpose. Since then, as many as a thousand campuses have participated enthusiastically in their efforts.⁶⁷ In 1999, a commission funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation wrote that the “engaged institution” was the future of higher education.⁶⁸

Ira Harkavy, director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, was the first to use the term “anchor institutions” to describe colleges and universities that are rooted to their communities economically, culturally, and socially. Through “democratic, mutually respectful, mutually beneficial partnerships,” Harkavy wrote in 2008, campuses “can be a catalyst to transform communities.”⁶⁹

Anchor institutions empower communities to change their fates and take charge of their own destinies, while communities themselves lead the way in determining their own futures. Anchor institution partnerships include teaching and research collaborations that draw on community members and meet community needs. But they also go further. As major employers and purchasers of goods and services, anchor campuses reject financially extractive practices and use their hiring, building, and buying power to invest economically in local communities.⁷⁰ They also partner with K-12 schools to create pipelines for local students to access and succeed in college.

Being an anchor institution is a choice, not a natural property of particular institutional types. From research universities to community colleges, any campus can be an anchor institution if it takes its community partnerships seriously and embeds them in all aspects of its educational experience, career development pathways, and organizational structure.

Trust In Action: Navajo Technical University



Chartered in 1979 as the Navajo Skill Center, Navajo Technical University (NTU) offers associate, bachelor’s, and graduate degrees aligned with workforce and community priorities in sectors such as engineering, technology, agriculture, and

applied sciences. As the largest public tribal land-grant college in the nation, and the only tribal institution offering a four year electrical engineering degree and a doctoral program in Diné culture and language sustainability, NTU demonstrates a deep

⁶⁷ “About,” Campus Compact, <https://compact.org/about>.

⁶⁸ Graham Spanier et al., *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999), <https://www.aplu.org/wp-content/uploads/returning-to-our-roots-the-engaged-institution.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Ira Harkavy et al., “Anchor Institutions as Partners in Building Successful Communities and Local Economies,” in Paul C. Brophy and Rachel D. Godsil, *Retooling HUD for a Catalytic Federal Government: A Report to Secretary Shaun Donovan* (Penn Institute for

Urban Research, 2009), https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Retooling_HUD_Chapter8.pdf.

⁷⁰ Shweta Ubhayakar, Mark Capeless, Rhonda Owens, Kathryn Snorrason, and David Zuckerman, *Anchor Mission Playbook*, Rush University Medical Center, 2017, https://www.democracycollaborative.org/s/PUB_AnchorMissionPlaybook.pdf; Davarian L. Baldwin, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities* (Bold Type Books, 2021).

commitment to sustaining Navajo culture and values while preparing workforce-ready graduates.⁷¹

Strategic partnerships with the University of New Mexico; the University of California, Berkeley; and Los Alamos National Laboratory strengthen NTU's mission through research collaborations, transfer pathways, and faculty partnerships in

fields like nursing, engineering, and advanced scientific research.⁷² Together, these relationships position NTU as a vital bridge between Indigenous knowledge systems and campus innovation, supporting both the educational advancement of Navajo students and the long term development of the Navajo Nation.

Trust In Action: College of Saint Benedict



In 1913, Benedictine Sisters founded the College of Saint Benedict (CSB) to educate German and Scandinavian Catholic immigrants in central Minnesota. Since that time, the population of the community has diversified, fueled by extraordinary growth of Somali and Latine communities within central Minnesota. Today, about one in four residents of the region identify as people of color. Historically, the economy of the region depended on agriculture and mining. More recently, health care, food processing, and manufacturing have kept the rural region thriving.

At CSB, academic program development is influenced deeply by community needs and consultation with community partners. After a 2021 equity dashboard found significant disparities in access to health care for the region's White residents and residents of color, CSB began a graduate program in nursing focused on educating medical providers for rural communities. Nursing faculty also partnered with Project H.E.A.L. to develop and run a free walk-in clinic offering physical and mental health services at East Side Community Outpost.⁷³ CSB staff,

nursing faculty, and nursing students identified the health care needs of the neighborhood, informed the design of the outpost, and administered ongoing medical services at the site.⁷⁴ The local police department's community response team and the local housing and redevelopment authority are also located in the outpost, improving community safety and helping with referrals.



Provided by the College of Saint Benedict

⁷¹ "Navajo Technical University Introduces Prestigious Doctoral Program in Diné Culture and Language Sustainability," Navajo Technical University, March 6, 2023, <https://www.navajotech.edu/navajo-technical-university-introduces-prestigious-doctoral-program-in-dine-culture-and-language-sustainability/>.

⁷² "Sandia National Laboratories and Los Alamos National Laboratory Visit NTU," Navajo Technical University, April 8, 2026, <https://www.navajotech.edu/sandia-national-laboratories-and-los-alamos-national-laboratory-visit-ntu/>.

⁷³ "Project H.E.A.L.," CentraCare, <https://www.centracare.com/services/project-h-e-a-l/>.

⁷⁴ Frank Rajkowski, "Nursing Students at CSB and SJU to Play Key Role in New Community Outpost," College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, September 25, 2024, <https://www.csbsju.edu/news/nursing-students-at-csb-and-sju-to-play-key-role-in-new-community-outpost/>.

Trust In Action: University of Texas at Arlington



University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), a research-focused doctoral institution in the suburbs of Dallas–Fort Worth, has placed community engagement at the center of its mission and strategic plan. It has hired faculty trained in community-engaged research, grown internship pathways, developed an alternative teacher certification program to help address a local teacher shortage, and invested in a Center for Service Learning, which embeds community engagement in courses across the curriculum.

Perhaps the campus’s most distinct community partnership was the development of RAPID, a rideshare service powered by self-driving cars that was integrated with Arlington’s public transit

system. Operating from 2021 to 2025, RAPID provided over 113,000 rides to community members and students.⁷⁵ In 2025, UTA president Jennifer Cowley received Campus Compact’s Richard Guarasci Award for Presidential Leadership, given to presidents “who demonstrate deep and sustained commitments to civic and community engagement throughout their careers.”⁷⁶



Trust In Action: Morgan State University



Morgan State University is a success story by almost any measure. Over the past two centuries, the historically Black college grew from its roots as a teachers’ college into a high research output university, earning in 2017 the designation of Maryland’s Preeminent Public Urban Research University. Despite its new focus on expanded doctoral education and research infrastructure, Morgan State has remained true to its deep commitment to Baltimore and the surrounding area.

Morgan State integrates teaching, research, and service in ways that reflect its mission and history. For example, leveraging a major grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Morgan State plans to develop a nonprofit medical school that will help address Maryland’s health care needs by expanding primary care capacity in the state.⁷⁷ Through curricular innovations, partnerships with local government, workforce development initiatives, and programs aimed at improving local health and educational and economic opportunities, Morgan State University continues to serve as an anchor in the Baltimore community.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Susan Schrock, “RAPID On-Demand AV Pilot Ends After Success in Arlington,” City of Arlington, May 29, 2025, <https://www.arlingtontx.gov/News-Articles/2025/May/RAPID-On-Demand-AV-Pilot-Ends-After-Success-in-Arlington>.

⁷⁶ “UTA President Receives National Award for Civic and Community Engagement,” *Fort Worth Report*, February 5, 2025, <https://fortworthreport.org/2025/02/05/uta-president-receives-national-award-for-civic-and-community-engagement/>.

⁷⁷ JT Moodee Lockman, “Morgan State University Plans to Launch Its Own Medical School After Securing \$1.75 Million Grant,” CBS News, August 28, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/maryland-morgan-state-university-medical-school-planning/>.

⁷⁸ “Community Engagement Footsteps at MSU,” Morgan State University Office of Community Services, <https://www.morgan.edu/office-of-community-services/community-engagement-footsteps-at-msu>.

The Challenges of Community Engagement

If anchor partnerships are strong contributors to public trust in higher education, why is every college and university not an anchor institution?

For one thing, community partnerships are time-consuming to establish and challenging to sustain. They take years of careful groundwork that requires learning community history and context, meeting community members where they are, listening to their priorities, and building interpersonal trust, along with dedicated infrastructure and financial investment.⁷⁹ Campus leaders who want to build these partnerships, writes former Wagner College president Richard Guarasci, “must be visionary, practical, resilient, and persistent,” armed with “democratic sensibilities and diplomatic patience.”⁸⁰

For community engagement to be successful, an institution needs to make community partnerships central to its mission. Although a community engagement office can help, no office can accomplish this objective alone. Instead, the entire campus must support and participate in community-based work, including embedding a community focus throughout its curriculum and programming.

Research universities face special difficulties in creating anchor partnerships. These institutions are resource rich and, contrary to their reputations, often eager to invest in community engagement. Research universities, though, often have fragmented and competitive institutional cultures, prioritize research success and prestige over community focus in the faculty tenure and promotion process, and draw most of their students from outside the local community. These features make it harder, though not impossible, for research universities to integrate community-based work into their missions, structures, and academic offerings.

Despite these challenges, the higher education sector needs to reorient itself to the community-focused approaches that its most trusted and trustworthy institutions are already implementing. Community connections and relationships—including in the communities their students call home—are one of the most important and effective ways for colleges and universities to build public trust. For institutions of higher learning, faculty, staff, and administrators, serving the community is no longer optional.

⁷⁹ Siew Fang Law and Ai Tam Le, “A Systematic Review of Empirical Studies on Trust Between Universities and Society,” *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 45, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2176598>; Donna Jo McCloskey et al., *Principles of Community Engagement*, 2nd ed. (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011), <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11699>.

⁸⁰ Richard Guarasci, *Neighborhood Democracy: Building Anchor Partnerships Between Colleges and Their Communities* (Routledge, 2022), 50.

Strategies to Consider

- Listen and learn before taking action.⁸¹ Rather than bringing community members to campus, venture into the community and meet people where they already are. Attend and participate in council and school board meetings. Visit and build relationships with local K-12 schools and community organizations. Learn history and context, build trustworthy relationships, co-create a public agenda, and then act in partnership to address community needs.
- Build infrastructure to embed community-engaged work throughout campus. Make use of infrastructure that already exists, including extension offices, satellite campuses, and other community-focused aspects of the institution.
- Consider appointing a chief engagement officer as a cabinet-level staff member empowered to coordinate engagement and partnerships for the whole campus.
- Encourage, support, and incentivize faculty and employee participation in community-engaged teaching and scholarship, including through hiring and promotion processes.⁸² Provide professional development support to help campus representatives engage effectively with the community.
- Convene faculty, staff, students, and community partners regularly to discuss community engagement, foster collaboration, and ensure that the institution is meeting community needs.
- Lift up workforce priorities as a crucial type of community partnership. Consult employer research when designing and improving academic offerings, and engage employers in codesigning community-based learning experiences.
- Amplify the impact of community solutions by building coalitions with other campuses and with local K-12 schools, businesses, and civic institutions.
- Partner with national organizations that specialize in helping campuses build pathways to community engagement. Campus Compact offers a Campus Action Planning framework for campuses developing or strengthening community engagement work.⁸³ Many professional associations offer critical support for institutions looking to build community partnerships. And AAC&U's Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation™ and Truth, Community Healing & Transformation Campus Centers effort promotes inclusive and community-based healing activities and policy designs that seek to challenge community narratives and broaden understanding of diverse experiences among people.
- For campuses that attract students from across the nation and globe, build relationships with students' home communities, and equip students with skills they can use to give back to those communities during college and after graduation. Build partnerships in rural communities as well as urban ones.⁸⁴
- Invest in community partnerships with commitment and follow-through, for as long as necessary. Nothing undermines public trust more than broken promises and abandoned partners.

⁸¹ "Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation™ (TRHT) Campus Centers," AAC&U, <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/truth-racial-healing-transformation-campus-centers>.

⁸² Rich G. Carter et al., *PTIE Findings: Expanding Promotion and Tenure Guidelines to Inclusively Recognize Innovation and Entrepreneurial Impact*, PTIE Summit 2020, <https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/downloads/nz8066230>; Rich G. Carter et al., "Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Promotion, and Tenure," *Science* 373, no. 6561

(September 17, 2021), <https://www.ptie.org/s/9-2021-PTIE-Science-Paper.pdf>.

⁸³ "Campus Action Planning," Campus Compact, <https://compact.org/current-programs/campus-action-planning>.

⁸⁴ Crystal R. Chambers and Loni Crumb, "Using Rural University-School-Partnerships for the Higher Education We Need," Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative, September 27, 2024, <https://www.cbglcollab.org/blog/1lruijvi9a9v01xyfpd9hisk5v6lc>.

Recommendation Three: Recommit to Inclusive Excellence

One of the most alarming findings in public opinion polls about higher education is that many young people, prospective and current students, and recent graduates are highly critical of colleges and universities.

In a 2022 poll, Gen Z respondents were more likely than older respondents to report that they “tend not to trust” American higher education institutions.⁸⁵ A 2025 poll of Gen Z college graduates found that nearly a quarter regretted attending college.⁸⁶ Another 2025 poll of current students found that, since they began college, more had lost trust in higher education than had gained it.⁸⁷

Many students list unaffordability as the source of their distrust in higher education. Another major factor is students’ sense of being alone and without support in a new, challenging, and high-stakes environment. A 2023 survey found similar results among high school graduates who opted out of college: “Whether I’ll be successful in college” was a top concern, as was “I’m not mentally ready for

college,” particularly among first-generation and lower-income students.⁸⁸ Students who do attend college can find themselves alienated from campus culture and unmoored from a sense of community, experiences that factor into the ongoing student mental health crisis.⁸⁹

The challenges faced by students from rural areas, for example, reflect the kinds of alienation that students from many other marginalized backgrounds have also faced.⁹⁰ Rural youth are less likely than other Americans to attend college in the first place, to grow up around college-educated adults, or to have a college in their community.⁹¹ Those who make it to campus often experience culture shock.⁹² And rural college graduates, especially from highly selective institutions,

⁸⁵ Rahul Choudaha, “Americans’ Most Trusted Universities, and the Need to Bridge Gaps in Public Trust,” *Morning Consult*, August 2, 2022, <https://pro.morningconsult.com/analysis/most-trusted-universities-gaps-public-trust>.

⁸⁶ Sydney Lake, “Gen Z Has Regrets: 1 in 4 Say They Wish They Hadn’t Gone to College or Would’ve Picked a Higher-Paying Industry,” *Fortune*, July 20, 2025, <https://fortune.com/2025/07/20/gen-z-regrets-going-to-college/>.

⁸⁷ Colleen Flaherty, “Decoding Student Trust,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 18, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2025/08/18/survey-students-link-trust-college-affordability>.

⁸⁸ Scott Jaschik, “Why Students Opt Not to Enroll,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/2023/06/12/why-students-opt-out-college>.

⁸⁹ Daniel Eisenberg, Sarah Ketchen Lipson, Justin Heinze, and Sasha Zhou, *The Healthy*

Minds Study: 2024–2025 Data Report (Healthy Minds Network, 2025), https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2024-2025_HMS-National-Data-Report_Student.pdf.

⁹⁰ Scout Meredith Best and Jeremy C. Young, “Recasting the Rural,” *APT Words*, Substack, March 4, 2026, <https://aptwords.substack.com/p/recasting-the-rural>.

⁹¹ “In Rural America, Too Few Roads Lead to College Success,” Lumina Foundation, 2019, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/focus-magazine/fall-2019/in-rural-america-too-few-roads-lead-to-college-success/>; “Postsecondary Enrollment Status of Youth from Rural Areas,” National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lbb>.

⁹² Mara Casey Tieken, *Educated Out: How Rural Students Navigate Elite Colleges—and What It Costs Them* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

find returning to their home communities to be culturally and economically challenging.⁹³

Alienation, aloneness, lack of support, lack of community—these are exactly the sorts of problems that inclusive excellence is designed to

solve. And although many American colleges and universities have taken steps forward over the past two decades, the unfinished project of inclusive excellence is still a key growth opportunity for advancing public trust in higher education.

The Inclusive Excellence Framework

In 2005, AAC&U coined the phrase “inclusive excellence” to describe a new strategic framework for colleges and universities. Dedicated to the premise that diversity and inclusion were requirements for educational excellence, the framework addressed access and equity, curricular diversity, campus climate, and student learning and development.⁹⁴

Inclusive excellence was, and is, about expanding and democratizing higher education access and student success. The goal, declared AAC&U’s board of directors in 2013, was to “break free of earlier views that an excellent liberal education should be reserved for the few.”⁹⁵ “Fulfilling our mission,” wrote AAC&U president Lynn Pasquerella in 2022, “calls for us to dismantle barriers to high-quality liberal education” and “support the growth, development, and well-being of the whole person.”⁹⁶

Campus DEI initiatives, designed to support students in ways that are tailored to their individual needs, backgrounds, viewpoints, and identities, are one type of inclusive excellence strategy. Investments in tutoring, advising, career readiness, community building, and financial security are also part of inclusive excellence work. So is an openness to student perspectives and ideas—treating students as full partners in the educational experience and encouraging and amplifying their voices.

There is a direct connection between advancing public trust in higher education and investing in the success of all students. Students report renewed faith in higher education when professors show interest in their well-being and when they teach competently and fairly.⁹⁷ Community colleges and other institutions that offer wraparound services for students score higher on measures of student trust than do private research-focused campuses.

Helping all students succeed in college and in their careers and lives, regardless of their identities and backgrounds, is the work of inclusive excellence. It is also at the center of higher education’s mission.

⁹³ Hanna K. Estes, Stuart Estes, Donald M. Johnson, Leslie D. Edgar, and Catherine W. Shoulders, “The Rural Brain Drain and Choice of Major: Evidence from One Land Grant University,” *NACTA Journal* 60, no. 1 (2016), https://nactaarchives.org/attachments/article/2378/6%20%20Estes_NACTA%20Journal.pdf; Terry T. Ishitani, “The Determinants of Out-Migration Among In-State College Students in the United States,” *Research in Higher Education* 52, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9187-y>.

⁹⁴ Carol Geary Schneider, *Making Liberal Education Inclusive: The Roots and Reach of the LEAP Framework for College Learning* (AAC&U, 2021), 74–75.

⁹⁵ Board of Directors, “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence,” AAC&U, June 2013, [https://www.uww.edu/documents/leap/Handouts and Worksheets/LEIEBdStatementtwosided.pdf](https://www.uww.edu/documents/leap/Handouts%20and%20Worksheets/LEIEBdStatementtwosided.pdf).

⁹⁶ Lynn Pasquerella, “Expansive Inclusivity,” *Liberal Education*, Winter 2022, <https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/articles/expansive-inclusivity>.

⁹⁷ Colleen Flaherty, “Decoding Student Trust,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 18, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2025/08/18/survey-students-link-trust-college-affordability>.

Inclusive Excellence as a Political Target

As a student-centered project, inclusive excellence should appeal to Americans across the political spectrum. Instead, it has become a central target of the political backlash against higher education over the past few years.

Since 2023, lawmakers have sought to eliminate DEI initiatives, and many of these offices and programs have been banned by law or closed by administrative decision. In 2025, the federal government went beyond targeting DEI to threaten other types of inclusive excellence programming. After cutting grants for TRIO programs that helped prepare students for college, the government proposed to defund TRIO entirely, on the grounds that the sixty-year-old TRIO was somehow DEI under another name.⁹⁸

Shutting down systems that support marginalized students does nothing to improve campuses, increase fairness, or advance public trust. Quite the opposite: When inclusive excellence projects are working, closing them abandons commitments campuses have made to students and damages those students' educational outcomes.

Helping all students succeed in college and in their careers and lives, regardless of their identities and backgrounds, is the work of inclusive excellence. It is also at the center of higher education's mission. Trustworthy campuses invest in student success and work to ensure that every student benefits and none is left behind.

Trust In Action: University of California, Merced



A 2024 recipient of the American Council on Education Award for Institutional Transformation, the University of California, Merced has worked diligently to expand higher education access for students in California's Central Valley.⁹⁹

Since its founding in 2006, the university has built intentional partnerships with local high schools, developed initiatives to support transfer student pathways, built new affordable housing for community college and transfer students, and launched a degree completion program for returning students. Through Merced Project 2020,

a \$1.2 billion public-private partnership, UC Merced grew its physical footprint while maintaining affordability, sustainability, and a strong student centered mission.

The university continues to be a national model for student-centered public higher education at a high-research doctoral university. In 2025 and 2026, the campus earned major national accolades, including recognition as a top 25 public university and a top performer in social mobility.

⁹⁸ Johanna Alonso, "Trump's DEI Crackdown Closes 120 TRIO Programs," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2025/10/27/trumps-dei-crackdown-closes-120-trio-programs>.

⁹⁹ "Education Council and Fidelity Honor Transformation at UC Merced," UC Merced, March 5, 2024, <https://news.ucmerced.edu/news/2024/education-council-and-fidelity-honor-transformation-uc-merced>.

Trust In Action: Hollins University



Hollins University launched the Hollins Opportunity for Promise through Education (HOPE) Scholarship in 2021 to make a college education affordable for more students. Originally open to students hailing from within forty miles of campus, the program was later expanded to cover tuition, fees, food, and housing for Pell Grant-eligible students from across the United States, enabling HOPE scholars to attend Hollins with no direct costs and no loans.

In recognition of the contributions made by enslaved members of the Hollins community,

Hollins also offers a renewable scholarship of up to full tuition coverage for descendants of the enslaved community in the Greater Roanoke Valley.

In the words of Hollins president Mary Dana Hinton, both scholarship programs are designed to ensure that financial barriers do not hinder student success for those who study at Hollins University, and that the university is “a leader in higher education for social, economic, and civic mobility.”¹⁰⁰

Ideological Difference and Inclusive Excellence

The widespread perception that colleges are inhospitable to conservative students, scholars, ideas, and priorities has been a key driver of government restrictions on the sector. The frustration many conservatives express regarding higher education stems from a feeling that campuses are hostile to their identities and ideas, that they are more likely to be shouted down and excluded than debated respectfully and welcomed.

While some of these criticisms are offered in bad faith, the underlying concerns are partly justified. That is not just a political weakness for higher education; it is a problem of inclusive excellence, one worthy of attention in this section.

Student surveys of the University of North Carolina System (2022) and the University of Wisconsin System (2023) found that, although most college

and university faculty hold left-of-center political views, most conservative students were comfortable expressing their own opinions in the structured environment of the classroom. They did not feel censored by their teachers, but they did feel censored elsewhere on campus by their liberal peers, in social settings, and on social media.¹⁰¹

For many students, college is a new kind of speech environment that is jarringly different from K-12 schools, which have different standards of academic freedom and stricter constitutional limits on speech. “In May of their senior year, students can lose access to graduation privileges for a hairstyle,” writes civil dialogue expert Lara Schwartz. “Three months later, at college, it’s a whole new set of rules—and often, students are not even told how the rules have changed.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ “Hollins Launches HOPE Program Nationwide to Ensure Talented Young Women Can Pursue a College Education with No Debt,” Hollins University, August 2, 2024, <https://www.hollins.edu/news/hollins-launches-hope-program-nationwide-to-ensure-talented-young-women-can-pursue-a-college-education-with-no-debt/>.

¹⁰¹ Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, and Mark McNeilly, *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue in the University of North Carolina System* (University of North Carolina, 2022), https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22160/2022/08/FECD_Report_8-21-22.pdf; April Bleske-Rechek, Eric Giordano,

Eric Kasper, Geoffrey Peterson, and Timothy Shiell, *UW System Student Views on Freedom of Speech: Summary of Survey Responses* (Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, 2023), <https://www.wisconsin.edu/civil-dialogue/download/SurveyReport20230201.pdf>; Erin Shaw and Shiri Spitz Siddiqi, “How Politically Diverse Are University Faculty?” *Heterodox Academy*, February 25, 2026, <https://heterodoxacademy.org/reports/how-politically-diverse-are-university-faculty>.

¹⁰² Lara Hope Schwartz, *Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in Classrooms and Life* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 68-69.

The solutions to conservative exclusion on campus lie in better education and more student support. Students need to learn how to disagree productively with people who hold beliefs different from theirs, and they need to be made welcome on campus. Growing campus investments in pluralism initiatives and dialogue-across-difference trainings can help support students and teach them the skills they need.

Rather than causing distrust of higher education among conservative students, properly implemented inclusive excellence programs can provide support for those students and build trust relationships with them. In supporting the success of students from all backgrounds, identities, and viewpoints, inclusive excellence is not an obstacle to advancing public trust in higher education; it is an indispensable part of the solution.

Trust In Action: Macalester College and the University of Northwestern–St. Paul



Through an institutional partnership facilitated by cross-partisan dialogue group Braver Angels, Macalester College and the University of Northwestern bring students, faculty, and administrators together to socialize and learn from each other. The two colleges in St. Paul, Minnesota, are geographically close but politically distant, with most students at Macalester, a traditional liberal arts college, identifying as liberal and most students at Northwestern, an evangelical Christian university, identifying as conservative.

Each college sends a group of students, a faculty member, and the college president to a gathering that alternates between the two campuses every two weeks. Their interactions include conversation about hot-button issues, shared activities, and relationship building, which create space for trust and mutual respect to develop.¹⁰³



Provided by Macalester College

¹⁰³ Catharine Richert, “Twin Cities Conservative and Liberal College Students Try Not to Stay in Their Lanes,” MPR News, May 15, 2025, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2025/05/15/macalester-college-and-university-of-northwestern-students-talk-politics>;

Corbin Hoornbeek and Suzanne M. Rivera, “We Have a Common Goal of a ‘More Perfect Union,’” September 16, 2025, University of Northwestern–St. Paul, <https://www.unwsp.edu/news/we-have-a-common-goal-of-a-more-perfect-union/>.

Strategies to Consider

- Build a student-centered culture at all types of institutions, including universities that see themselves as focused more on research than on teaching.
 - Make it easy for students to get help. Wraparound supports and consistent touchpoints with advisors, faculty, and peer mentors create a culture of inclusive excellence.
 - Honor the wisdom and values that empower students in their home communities, and create spaces for those ideas and values on campus.
 - Make students partners in campus life and co-owners of the institution’s public purpose. Welcome student input in campus conversations, participate in student-led events, and respond honestly and promptly to student concerns.
 - Train faculty on “trust moves” that engage students through competence and care, building strong mentor relationships and helping students feel they belong on campus.¹⁰⁴
 - Teach civil discourse and pluralism from orientation to graduation. Embrace initiatives—such as the Campus Discourse Challenge
- led by ALL IN and Campus Compact, or the Constructive Dialogue Institute—that promote best practices for civil discourse across campuses.¹⁰⁵ Train hiring, retention, and promotion committees to embrace pluralistic frameworks when evaluating colleagues.
 - Explore strategies for supporting students and faculty with diverse political viewpoints. Examples include pipeline initiatives, similar to the partnership Johns Hopkins University has developed with the American Enterprise Institute; new interdisciplinary academic programs in civic thought; and other models.¹⁰⁶
 - Take advantage of online programs and emerging digital innovation to democratize access to high-value teaching, learning, and research. But be prepared: Students accessing education virtually or remotely may feel alienated from campus life and will need extra support.
 - Double down on inclusive excellence as central to the mission of higher education. Breaking down barriers to student success is the natural work of colleges and universities and essential to advancing public trust.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Felten, Rachel Forsyth, and Kathryn A. Sutherland, “Building Trust in the Classroom: A Conceptual Model for Teachers, Scholars, and Academic Developers in Higher Education,” *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 11 (July 2023), <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.11.20>.

¹⁰⁵ “Campus Discourse Challenge,” ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, <https://allinchallenge.org/discourse/>; “About Us,” Constructive Dialogue Institute, <https://constructivedialogue.org/about/>.

¹⁰⁶ “Johns Hopkins Works to Bolster Intellectual Pluralism across the University,” Johns Hopkins University, April 21, 2025, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2025/04/21/johns-hopkins-american-enterprise-institute-partnership/>; Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, *Civic Thought: A Proposal for University-Level Civic Education* (American Enterprise Institute, 2023), <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Civic-Thought-A-Proposal-for-University-Level-Civic-Education.pdf>.

Recommendation Four: Tell a Clearer Story

An April 2026 poll for *Inside Higher Ed* found that half of all college presidents were actively taking steps to advance public trust in their institutions. For more than half of the presidents who reported they were taking these steps, what they were doing amounted to nothing more than a public relations campaign.¹⁰⁷

PR is not enough. In the absence of other reforms, public communications from colleges and universities will not be sufficient to turn the tide of public opinion. But better communication is still a necessary part of the solution. Good public relations work really can move the needle

by reminding the public of what colleges and universities already do well.

In order for that to happen, higher education's communication strategy needs to change.

¹⁰⁷ Colleen Flaherty, "Presidents Puzzled on Rebuilding Public Trust in Higher Ed," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2026/04/09/presidents-puzzled-rebuilding-public-trust-higher>.

The Stories We Tell

Like everything about the American higher education sector, communications with the public happen in a decentralized way. The best funded and most visible communications work comes from individual institutions advertising themselves as destinations for prospective students. In their marketing, colleges focus on competitive advantage—making themselves look good in comparison with their peers—and on the benefits individual students can gain through an education on their campus.

This messaging works for individual colleges trying to get ahead. But as the primary method by which the sector communicates with the public, it has several limitations. It preaches to the already converted: people who understand the value of college and want to attend, or send their children to, an institution that fits their needs. It champions one campus rather than higher education as a whole. And it has little to offer the majority of Americans who do not have, or do not plan to pursue, a college degree.

Perhaps campaigns promoting individual institutions were enough ten or twenty years ago. But as the political attacks on higher education have grown, narratives focused on specific campuses have become inadequate.

Today, ordinary people are bombarded on social media by one-sided criticisms of elite private research institutions in faraway states, often focused on DEI or other contested campus activities. Those stories drag down impressions of the whole sector, and they may, through sheer repetition, come to seem more legitimate than the real actions of local colleges and universities.

Earlier public opinion surveys, like a March 2023 YouGov poll that found broad support for DEI and other contested campus activities when described in vague, nonthreatening terms, underestimated the challenge campuses faced.¹⁰⁸ When Spitfire Strategies dug deeper in late 2024, convening focus groups of people who held middle-of-the-road views on DEI and higher education as a whole, they found a far bleaker picture. The focus group participants held a dim view of work aimed at removing race-based barriers to academic success, no matter how it was described. Meanwhile, many common defenses used by higher education advocates—talking about academic freedom, or positioning colleges as essential for democracy, without defining what democracy means—came across as elitist and out of touch.¹⁰⁹

In October 2025, Well Positioned reviewed the landscape of the communications tools available to and in use by campus leaders. They found that the evidence base campuses could draw on to counter threats to higher education was fragmented and siloed, and that rather than using language accessible to everyday people, the messages coming from the sector were pitched to policymaking and higher education audiences. They also noted that campuses were equipped to communicate reactively about political crises, but not to build proactive narratives around the value of colleges to communities.¹¹⁰

“Most Americans are neither strong defenders nor firm opponents of higher education,” noted the Institute for Citizens & Scholars in a recent report. “Nearly half fall into a movable middle—people who believe in the promise of college but want to see it evolve.”¹¹¹ For those audiences, higher education’s dominant narratives are not working.

¹⁰⁸ Eli McKown-Dawson, “How Do Americans Feel about Regulation of Public Universities?” YouGov, March 15, 2023, <https://yougov.com/en-us/articles/45414-how-americans-feel-regulation-public-universities>.

¹⁰⁹ *Shift Terms, Not Values: Reaching Persuadable Audiences on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Higher Education* (Spitfire, 2024), <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Shift-Terms-Not-Values.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ Well Positioned, “Challenges in Higher Education Communications: A Landscape Review,” research briefing (virtual presentation), December 8, 2025.

¹¹¹ *Trust in Higher Education Starts Local: What Americans Want for the Future of College—and How We Get There* (Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2026), <https://cands.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/CS-Trust-in-Higher-Education-Starts-Local-FNL.pdf>.

Toward Clearer Communication Strategies

Since at least the launch of the American Council on Education’s “Solutions for Our Future” campaign over two decades ago, higher education has understood the basic contours of a successful narrative for the sector.¹¹² College is an engine of social mobility, a driver of economic innovation, and a producer of lifesaving research. It is not just an individual benefit for students but an institution people should want in their communities even if they themselves never use it directly. To paraphrase a recent report by Hattaway Communications, colleges make communities work.¹¹³

This is the right story for colleges to tell, and it has reemerged from time to time among national higher education associations. For example, the American Council on Education’s recent “Higher Education Builds America” campaign and BVK and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education’s “Proud Sponsor” campaign both use similar messaging.¹¹⁴

But the subtleties matter. Too much focus on the economic benefits of college can erase the perceived value of degrees in fields that have less explicit pathways to immediate employment. Too little focus on economics, and the community benefits of colleges start to seem theoretical or available only to intellectual elites.

Recent work by Spitfire and Metropolitan Group, a firm that has had success promoting pro-democracy

narratives in backsliding democracies in other parts of the world, suggests a way out of this trap. The pro-college narrative, like all pro-democracy narratives, is stronger when it addresses a set of shared values that go beyond the specifics of higher education. Chief among those shared values are freedom, fairness, and fearlessness or strength. Others include representation, responsibility, safety or security, honesty, family, aspiration, and belonging.¹¹⁵ By rooting the higher education story in these values, higher education leaders and advocates can help people think about the big picture of why college is good for their communities, without getting bogged down in technical debates.

Higher education leaders and advocates are more successful when they use accessible language, avoid jargon, and offer concrete examples grounded in everyday experiences. Another key ingredient is humility: Acknowledging mistakes, and the reality that colleges are not perfect, shows that the system is flexible and innovative enough to solve problems and respond to public concerns. And advocates should make every effort to lift up the types of institutions where most American students are educated—community colleges and regional public universities—and reorient the national conversation away from the tiny minority of elite private institutions that seem always to be the targets of national criticism.

¹¹² Doug Lederman, “Solutions for Our Future,” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 14, 2005, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/11/15/solutions-our-future>.

¹¹³ “New Narratives Reframe Why College Matters,” Hattaway Communications, <https://www.hattaway.com/blog/case-study/new-narratives-reframe-why-college-matters>.

¹¹⁴ “Higher Education Builds America,” American Council on Education, <https://highereducationbuildsameric.org/>; College: Proud Sponsor of America at Its Best, <https://whycollegematters.org/>.

¹¹⁵ *A New Narrative to Promote Democracy in the United States: Findings and Recommendations Report* (Metropolitan Group, June 18, 2025), https://www.metgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/MG-US-Democracy-Narratives-Report_FINAL_June-18-2025.pdf.

Drawing from their ongoing research on higher education and democracy narratives, Spitfire Strategies and Metropolitan Group have prepared this communications brief for AAC&U. It is intended to help campus leaders communicate in ways that advance public trust in their institutions and in colleges and universities as a whole.

Higher Education Strengthens Lives, Communities, and Our Democracy: An Affirmative Narrative for Turbulent Times

How to Use This Framework

Created in collaboration with leaders and organizations across the higher education sector, this narrative guidance is designed to ensure our messages, stories, and data points can better make the case for higher education's foundational role in serving our students and communities and strengthening our democracy. This message framework serves as a cohesive, aligned core narrative for campuses to inform and guide communication materials. We recommend all campuses tailor the framework to connect with key audiences and highlight campus-specific opportunities for engagement and calls to action.

The framework is intended as a starting point, not a script, for campus leaders communicating about the role of higher education. It can help guide speeches, op-eds, reports, website copy, social media content, talking points, advocacy materials, and campus communications that make the case for why higher education matters to students, communities, the economy, and public life.

Colleges and universities can and should feel free to develop content inspired by the framework, mindful of their institution's audience, context, and communications goals. A campus president might use it to frame a public address about the value of higher education in a divided civic environment. A communications team might use it to develop

a story series that shows how students, faculty, alumni, and community partners are helping to solve local challenges. A government relations team might use it to speak with policymakers about the connection between higher education, workforce preparation, research, innovation, civic learning, and community well-being. A faculty member might use it to describe how liberal education, dialogue across differences, and community-based learning help shape the broader civic space and benefit students and communities.

In all of these cases, the narrative will be stronger when it is specific and grounded in local proof points. Rather than repeating the full message in every setting, campus leaders can select the elements of the messaging most relevant to the moment: the challenge they need to name, the solution they are advancing, the benefits they can demonstrate, and the action they want their audience to take.

We recommend pairing the narrative with concrete examples from campus life, student success, research initiatives, workforce programs, civic learning efforts, and campus-community partnerships. In doing so, institutions can move from broad claims about the value of higher education to clear, credible stories about how higher education strengthens lives, communities, and democracy in everyday life.

Narrative and Message Framework

Narrative	Higher education strengthens lives, communities, and our democracy.
Core Message	Colleges and universities prepare students for good jobs, power local economies, and bring people together from all walks of life. They help communities tackle real challenges—from improving health care to strengthening small businesses—while driving research and innovation that makes us all more secure and shapes our shared future. They also help prepare people to participate more fully in community life by encouraging critical thinking, open dialogue, and taking part in the decisions that affect their lives. That is how our democracy works in everyday life. Higher education isn’t perfect—cost and access are real challenges that deserve practical solutions. But when we strengthen higher education, we expand freedom, opportunity, and shared prosperity, helping communities across the country thrive and keeping our democracy strong.
Challenge	Growing distrust, rising barriers to access, and political attacks are weakening higher education’s role in public life. At a time when many Americans feel divided and disconnected, the challenge is not only to build trust but to ensure higher education remains a relevant, accessible, and inclusive force that expands opportunity, strengthens connection, and supports the freedom to participate fully in civic life.
Solution	Strengthening higher education’s role in public life requires rebuilding trust, protecting open inquiry, and expanding affordable, flexible pathways for learners at every stage of life. Deeper community connection and stronger public support can help higher education create more opportunity, strengthen participation, and reinforce its value to the people and places it serves.
Benefits	When higher education is accessible, trusted, and connected to community life, it expands opportunity, strengthens local communities, and prepares the people and professions we rely on every day. Research and innovations promote our health, safety, and security. Our colleges and universities also help build a more informed and engaged public by creating space for critical thinking, dialogue across differences, and shared problem-solving.
Call to Action	Strengthening an affirmative narrative for higher education and its crucial place in a healthy democracy is something we can do together to expand opportunity and keep our communities connected and strong. By advocating for higher education’s wide-reaching potential for students and our communities alike, we help ensure more people have the freedom to learn, contribute, and shape the future we share.

Expanding the Messengers

Getting the messaging right is the first step. But to be successful, higher education also needs to make two key changes in how it delivers that message.

First, the communications campaign for higher education will succeed only if individual campuses implement it in their own external communications.

National higher education associations will never have the resources or the influence to reach most of the public with a communications campaign. There is no hundred-million-dollar donor waiting to fund an effort that fills social media feeds and appears in national media markets. If higher education is to communicate successfully with the public about its value, campuses themselves will have to lead the way.

Without giving up their quest for competitive advantage, college communications teams should look for ways to incorporate a positive narrative about higher education as a whole into their marketing campaigns. That includes messaging that uplifts the value of college beyond the value of the individual institution, and that highlights the relationship between campuses and their communities, benefiting both students and nonstudents.

If higher education is to communicate successfully with the public about its value, campuses themselves will have to lead the way.

Groups of institutions can also advance these goals collectively. For example, the Big Ten Conference provides its member campuses with free advertising blocks during nationally televised sporting events. In 2025, the Big Ten campuses

pooled some of their advertising time to air the “We Are Here” ad campaign promoting the value of higher education as a sector.¹¹⁶

Second, higher education needs to expand and diversify its messengers.

Campuses often rely on presidents and communications staff as their primary communicators. That instinct is right; presidents are often trusted messengers in the community, with prestige and relationships that make people listen when they speak. But they should not be the only storytellers higher education has in its corner.

Governing board members are an important, and often neglected, group of champions of higher education. Many are informed and influential citizens, with clout and a big audience, who can speak with independent credibility about the genuine benefits of higher education to individuals and to society. They need training and resources, though, to help them promote not just their own campuses but higher education in general. The now-defunct Guardians Initiative at the Association of Governing Boards made great strides in this work; a similar program should be revived.¹¹⁷

Community trust is built at all levels of the college, most importantly by those who are most directly giving and receiving the benefits of a college education. Alumni, faculty, and community partners are often both supporters and examples of the benefits of higher education. Colleges should ask these constituents to serve as ambassadors, train them in effective messaging and strategies, and reward them for their efforts. Campuses should make a particular effort to invest in current students as communicators of the value of higher education, arming them with authentic ways to tell their stories

¹¹⁶ “New Ad Highlights National Impact of Big Ten Universities,” Big Ten Conference, <https://bigten.org/article/blt9b57ef0dec561f23/>.

¹¹⁷ “The Guardians Initiative,” Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, <https://agb.org/advocacy/the-guardians-initiative-reclaiming-the-public-trust/>.

and encouraging their involvement in decision-making around communications.

Finally, employers can be particularly effective advocates of the value of higher education. While public support for colleges and universities has become polarized along partisan lines, AAC&U's most recent survey of employers found little difference between Republicans and Democrats in terms of employer confidence in higher education.¹¹⁸ Since employers often hire recent college graduates, they have a clear understanding

of the skills campuses are imparting to their students. Their generally favorable view of colleges, their status in the community, and their political diversity make them ideal messengers who can reach audiences that campuses themselves cannot.

Fortified with a clearer story, a legion of trusted and effective storytellers, and an expanded audience, higher education has the power to change its public perception. It is time to act.

¹¹⁸ Ashley P. Finley, *The Agility Imperative: How Employers View Preparation for an Uncertain Future* (AAC&U, 2025), <https://dgm81phhv63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/AgilityImperative2025.pdf>.

Strategies to Consider

- Communicate in ways that benefit public perceptions of higher education as a whole, not just individual institutions.
- Show how higher education brings value to communities, not just individual students. Demonstrate to people how they benefit directly from having a relationship with a local college or university, whether or not that relationship is documented with a degree.
- Leverage shared values to demonstrate that higher education enhances freedom, promotes fair opportunity, and builds community resilience. The public responds to a vision of higher education that provides opportunity for all students, helps people build confident futures in an unpredictable world, and contributes to communities that work for everyone.
- Follow guidance from evidence-based messaging research. Use specific examples, draw on experiences relevant to ordinary people, and avoid jargon. Resist the urge to double down on or revert to old messages that have proven not to work with a broad audience.
- Use evidence to show that colleges and universities are delivering on the educational mission they promise. The American Council on Education's Economic Indicators Map offers a helpful summary of the economic value of higher education in each state.¹¹⁹ AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) provides reliable, comparable evidence across institutions and contexts to demonstrate whether students actually graduate with essential skills.¹²⁰
- Make a real effort to reorient the discourse about higher education to the institutions where most students are educated, and that also have the most public support: community and technical colleges and regional public universities.
- Tailor messages to particular audiences. "The public" is a broad and varied group of people with different interests and values; identifying persuadable audiences and providing a narrative they will find compelling is key to successful communication.
- Engage trustees, students, alumni, faculty, employers, and community partners to build an army of trusted messengers. Provide communications and messaging training so they can promote higher education in ways that appeal to the public, and track and support them in that work. Listen and learn from them, too, drawing on their experiences to understand what works and resonates with their networks.
- Embrace humility. Listen—really listen—to people's frustrations with higher education, own up to mistakes, provide credible pathways for improvement, and follow up.
- Act in ways that demonstrate that your words can be trusted. Behave with integrity. Build bridges. Showcase and advance good deeds. Lead with fairness, competency, and hope.

¹¹⁹ "The Economic Impact of Higher Education in America," American Council on Education, <https://www.acenet.edu/Policy-Advocacy/Pages/National-Engagement/Economic-Impact-Higher-Ed.aspx>.

¹²⁰ "VALUE: Authentic Evidence of Student Learning," AAC&U, <https://www.aacu.org/value>.

Recommendation Five: Coordinate a Mission-Centered Defense

Throughout this report, we have argued that colleges and universities should inspire trust by making themselves trustworthy—innovative, community-centered, welcoming, and good at communicating what they do well.

Our final recommendation is simple: For a sector to earn trust, its constituents must be able to trust it to defend itself.

Higher education faces a crisis involving a multitude of challenges, some of its own making. This moment requires humility and openness to the ideas of higher education's critics and reformers, whatever their political views or motivations. To thrive, higher education needs to champion constructive change that furthers its mission. But it also needs to mount a robust and coordinated defense against actions that damage that mission.

Today, the greatest threats to the mission and purpose of higher education are government restrictions on the ideas that can be expressed on college and university campuses. These restrictions are a threat to institutional autonomy, which is central to colleges' ability to educate students and create new knowledge.

For a sector to earn trust, its constituents must be able to trust it to defend itself.

College and University Autonomy

In American colleges and universities, the freedom of ideas on campus is often discussed in terms of academic freedom—particularly the 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure, coauthored by AAC&U (then the Association of American Colleges) and the American Association of University Professors. That statement, adopted as official policy on most campuses, outlined a freedom of ideas that rests primarily with faculty and academic departments—in research, in teaching, and in intramural and extramural speech.¹²¹

By contrast, in Europe and other parts of the world, the freedom of ideas on campus is imagined as a form of college and university autonomy: the independence of higher education institutions from direct government control. In this model, intellectual freedom rests not only with individual faculty members or with the faculty as a group but with the whole campus as an institution.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement of institutional autonomy is the 2020 Magna Charta Universitatum, an updated version of a 1988 document signed by nearly a thousand universities across the globe. “Intellectual and moral autonomy,” declared the 2020 statement, “is the hallmark of any university and a precondition for the fulfilment of its responsibilities to society. That independence needs to be recognised and protected by governments and society at large, and defended vigorously by institutions themselves.”¹²² Other international statements, including one coordinated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and another by a

working group convened with the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to freedom of expression, make similar points.¹²³

American colleges and universities benefit from a partnership with federal and state governments. In most aspects of their operations, colleges would be wrong to seek complete autonomy from government authorities. Government officials’ priorities often reflect the will of the voters, and officials often have good reason to intervene on campus in matters of finance, student success, student safety, community involvement, and more. These interventions can help colleges carry out their missions and serve their communities more effectively. An April 2025 letter coordinated by AAC&U and signed by over 660 college, university, and scholarly society presidents included a call for “constructive engagement” between the government and campus leaders, not freedom from oversight or accountability.¹²⁴

The problem arises when the government uses its power over colleges and universities to restrict the ideas that are taught, promoted, expressed, or discussed on campus.

Knowledge and ideas are the end products of colleges and universities. Higher education institutions exist to discover new truths that benefit society and to open students’ minds, preparing them for fulfilling lives and careers.¹²⁵ These twin missions require colleges to ensure that students and faculty can research, teach, and evaluate an unlimited variety of competing ideas, without outside restrictions.

¹²¹ American Association of University Professors and Association of American Colleges, *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/policy-statements/1940-statement-principles-academic>.

¹²² *Magna Charta Universitatum 2020* (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum, 2020), <https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020>.

¹²³ *Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy* (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021), https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/questionnaires/2021_principiosinteramericanos_libertadacademica_autonomiauniversitaria_eng.pdf; *Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom*

(Scholars at Risk, 2024), https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Principles-for-Implementing-the-Right-to-Academic-Freedom_FINAL.pdf.

¹²⁴ “A Call for Constructive Engagement,” AAC&U, April 22, 2025, <https://www.aacu.org/newsroom/a-call-for-constructive-engagement>.

¹²⁵ *What Liberal Education Looks Like: What It Is, Who It’s For, and Where It Happens* (AAC&U, 2015), <https://www.aacu.org/publication/what-liberal-education-looks-like-what-it-is-who-its-for-and-where-it-happens>.

In reality, no campus is completely free from outside influence, including from their own communities, funders, and alumni. Nor is government restriction the only way intellectual freedom can be narrowed on campus; ideological conformity, if it makes teachers or students afraid to examine certain ideas on their merits, can itself be a real threat to the mission of higher education.

But redressing social pressure or ideological imbalance by placing government restrictions

on curricular or pedagogical choices creates an even greater threat: the official government suppression of ideas in an institution that requires intellectual freedom to carry out its mission. At both public and private institutions, college and university leaders should recognize that accepting government-imposed limits on intellectual freedom is too dear a price to pay, even if the alternative is funding cuts or other penalties.

The Need for Coordinated Defense

Compared with the rest of the world, the American higher education system is unusually decentralized. Colleges and universities are governed not by a single federal authority but by a patchwork of federal, state, local, private, and independent groups. This decentralized structure is a strength that has led to great experimentation in form and function. But it becomes a weakness when colleges and universities need to band together against a threat to the entire sector.

On some issues, higher education does coordinate effectively. Colleges and universities work successfully through national associations to secure and amend federal legislation relating to appropriations and policy matters. Some regional associations have developed effective policy-focused coalitions. Faculty members collaborate across institutions on research and through academic and professional associations. And campuses have adopted many voluntary innovations through widespread collaboration, including integrated four-year curricula, general education learning outcomes, the promotion of high-impact practices, and more.¹²⁶

Still, there are notable gaps. At the state level, public colleges and universities often have

adversarial relationships with one another, competing for resources in ways that make it difficult to band together to tackle shared challenges. Institutions of different types may see little need to make common cause with one another. Defenses against government overreach are often left to outside advocacy groups that have difficulty gaining the trust or participation of campus leaders. And historic animosities among faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, and alumni weaken the ability of institutions to unify against external threats.¹²⁷ As a result, leaders of institutions facing government restrictions too often are forced to go it alone, without adequate support from either on-campus colleagues or outside peers.

If we want our campus leaders to show moral courage and defend the freedom of ideas at their institutions, we need to create environments that reward courage. Campus leaders should contribute to those environments, but they cannot be expected to do it alone. Better defense for higher education can come only through coordination.

We use the term “coordination” deliberately. Uniform action in such a decentralized sector is not possible or desirable; each institution brings unique

¹²⁶ Carol Geary Schneider, *Making Liberal Education Inclusive: The Roots and Reach of the LEAP Framework for College Learning* (AAC&U, 2021).

¹²⁷ Lee Gardner, “The Campus Cold War: Faculty vs. Administrators,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-campus-cold-war-faculty-vs-administrators>.

circumstances that factor into its choices. When it comes to defending the mission and purpose of higher education, campuses need not respond in unison, but they should sing from the same hymnal.

Former education secretary Arne Duncan and former US ambassador to Hungary David Pressman argue that US “universities should embrace a principle long understood by NATO: An attack on one is an attack on all.”¹²⁸ Campuses should certainly be willing to stand in solidarity with other institutions and institution types that are under threat. But they should also go further.

When it comes to defending the mission and purpose of higher education, campuses need not respond in unison, but they should sing from the same hymnal.

For colleges and universities to coordinate more effectively in their own defense, they need to cultivate a leadership culture that is less competitive and more collaborative. Rather than trying to outperform their competitors, campuses should work hand in hand with other colleges, organizations, and community partners to accomplish and defend their shared missions. Campus leaders should also invest in internal communication and trustworthiness, creating environments where faculty, staff, and students feel comfortable banding together when the campus itself is under attack by outside forces.

The public is more likely to trust institutions that stand firm against threats to their core mission, unify and coordinate in the face of those threats, and identify clear lines between constructive engagements that further their mission and restrictions that imperil it. What that looks like in practice will differ from campus to campus. But however it applies to a particular college, coordinated defense is necessary for the survival of higher education as a place of intellectual freedom.

Trust In Action: The Alliance for Higher Education



The Alliance for Higher Education, launched in January 2026, works to unite the higher education sector in defense of fair opportunity, college and university self-governance, and the freedom to learn. Led by former Delta College president Mike Gavin, the Alliance leads advocacy campaigns against restrictive laws and policies, promotes the

values of intellectual freedom and college and university autonomy through public programming and media appearances, coordinates an expanding collective impact network of higher education and civil society partners, and builds and implements plans for a brighter future for colleges and universities.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Arne Duncan and David Pressman, “Universities Are Sending Trump a Dangerous Message,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2026/02/09/colleges-universities-trump-administration-political-interference/>.

¹²⁹ “About,” Alliance for Higher Education, <https://allianceforhighered.org/about>.

Strategies to Consider

- Treat government restrictions on ideas in educational contexts as a core threat to the mission and purpose of higher education—a matter as concerning as significant budget cuts or other major challenges. Restricting the intellectual freedom of a campus can lead to the loss of faculty, staff, and programs and the diminution of students' educations and of knowledge production.
- Avoid overcompliance or advance compliance with federal and state directives that negatively impact an institution's mission and purpose. When college and university leaders embrace or accept government directives that silence ideas on campus and restrict educational experiences, they call into question their commitment to their institutional missions, which in turn undermines public trust in their institutions. Sometimes, leaders have no choice. But if possible, wait to comply with such directives until they are legally or financially necessary, and do so in a way that does not exceed the requirements of the law.
- In situations where laws or directives may themselves be illegal or unconstitutional, seek and accept help from public interest law firms in defending a campus's mission and purpose.
- When the government imposes restrictions on ideas at a campus, come to the defense of peer institutions of all types, from community colleges to research universities, recognizing that an attack on one is an attack on all.
- Build incentives, including in hiring and evaluation processes, to encourage campus leaders to demonstrate collaborative impact rather than mere competitive advantage.
- Participate in coalitions and associations that develop and implement national playbooks for defending autonomy and the freedom of ideas in higher education, adapting those playbooks to the particular circumstances of an institution, but acting in concert with other organizations or institutions when the need arises.
- Build trusted relationships throughout campus and across institutions that can be activated in a crisis.
- Through prudent preparation and strategy work, create a campus environment that preempts impossible choices and enables leaders to act with moral courage.

CONCLUSION

A college that invests in students and communities, embraces innovation and inclusive excellence, communicates effectively with the public, and defends its mission and autonomy is a college that earns and deserves trust.

There is no secret ingredient to public trust, just authentic relationships, hard work, humility, integrity, and courage, sustained over time. Any campus can do it. To advance public trust in higher education as a whole, every campus must try.

The Trust Agenda represents what higher education needs in this moment of crisis: a workable plan for building a new social contract between colleges and the public without undermining the mission and purpose of higher education or hastening the sector's decline. By implementing the Trust Agenda in ways that make sense for their specific needs, campuses can seize the momentum from critics and take control of their own destinies.

Implementing the Trust Agenda on campuses across the country will not be easy, but it is work worth doing. It will require building authentic connections and relationships on and off campus, demonstrating trustworthiness consistently, and finding the courage to embrace change, center the public good, and stand up for higher education's

mission. The success of this framework will be measured not in days or weeks, but in years. The steadfast commitment of higher education institutions to bettering themselves over time is what will turn the tide of public opinion and position colleges and universities to thrive.

We close with a commitment to our readers: Campuses will not have to undertake these challenges alone. In the coming months and years, AAC&U's Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education initiative will work with campus and civil society leaders to implement these recommendations throughout the higher education sector, to develop tools and resources that can be used at the campus level and nationally, and to build communities of practice that will advance the work of transformation.¹³⁰ With this report and with actions to come, we intend both to end a difficult period in the history of higher education and to launch a new era of opportunity that secures the transformative impact of higher education for our students, communities, and society.

¹³⁰ "Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education," AAC&U, <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/advancing-public-trust-in-higher-education>.

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