
THE COLLEGE OF 2020: STUDENTS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is college? And why should I go? Those may be the defining questions for colleges over the next decade. More than an expression of teenage angst, they reflect a fundamental transformation in the way students see higher education, and how they want to go about getting it.

The traditional model of college is changing, as demonstrated by the proliferation of colleges (particularly for-profit institutions), hybrid class schedules with night and weekend meetings, and, most significantly, online learning. The idyll of four years away from home—spent living and learning and growing into adulthood—will continue to wane. It will still have a place in higher education, but it will be a smaller piece of the overall picture.

Students' convenience is the future. More students will attend classes online, study part time, take courses from multiple universities, and jump in and out of colleges. Students will demand more options for taking courses to make it easier for them to do what they want when they want to do it. And they will make those demands for economic reasons, too. The full-time residential model of higher education is getting too expensive for a larger share of the American population. More and more students are looking for lower-cost alternatives to attending college. Three-year degree programs, which some colleges are now launching, will almost assuredly proliferate. The trend toward low-cost options also will assuredly open doors for more inexpensive online options.

These changes, and the pressure they will put on colleges to adapt, are coming at a particularly acute time. While many jobs still do not require a college degree, nor will they in the future, most of the higher-paying, career-oriented jobs increasingly require a college degree as a means of entry or advancement. In other words, the product colleges are offering is in greater demand than ever. But impatience over how slowly colleges are changing is perhaps higher than ever, too. That is reflected in significantly higher enrollment levels at community colleges and for-profit colleges.

This is the first Chronicle Research Services report in a three-part series on what higher education will look like in the year 2020. It is based on reviews of research and data on trends in higher education, interviews with experts who are shaping the future of colleges, and the results of a poll of members of a Chronicle Research Services panel of admissions officials.

Later reports in this series will look at college technology and facilities in 2020, and the faculty of the future.

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What Will Have to Happen to Make Changes Possible?

Colleges that have resisted putting some of their courses online will almost certainly have to expand their online programs quickly. Many colleges are learning from the for-profit college industry that they must start courses and certificate programs at multiple times throughout the year. In addition, students now in elementary school are going to expect more connectivity and creativity from colleges.

The conversion to more convenience for students will multiply over the next decade. To some degree, those situations are already happening, and they will be amplified as time goes on:

- Students will increasingly expect access to classes from cellular phones and other portable computing devices
- They may sign up to take a course in person, and then opt to monitor class meetings online and attend whenever they want.
- Classroom discussions, office hours with a professor, lectures, study groups, and papers will all be online.

Colleges will need to offer those options in addition to the face-to-face instruction. At the same time that many students are demanding more online options, some also want to learn the old-fashioned way—in classrooms. Some students recognize that they need the discipline of going to classes at set places and times, or they will never get around to studying. Some students may need more time to finish their degrees. Some colleges might accept that many high-school graduates are simply not ready for college and add a “new” first year to college educations that would be entirely remedial. Then students would be ready to start work toward a bachelor’s degree.

Colleges must be ready to offer all of these options. **The challenge will be to provide them simultaneously and be flexible enough to change the methods as the market changes.** Faculty members must be flexible, too. The Internet has made most information available to everyone, and faculty members must take that into consideration when teaching.

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There is very little that students cannot find on their own if they are inspired to do so. And many of them will be surfing the Net in class. The faculty member, therefore, may become less an oracle and more an organizer and guide, someone who adds perspective and context, finds the best articles and research, and sweeps away misconceptions and bad information.

Colleges are under immense pressure to change quickly because of intensified scrutiny of the cost of college. In addition, the pressure to adapt to instant access to information, and to ways to provide it, is being built right now by tomorrow's college students. **More than two-thirds of school districts in 2007-8 had at least one student who was taking an online course**, according to a recent report by the Sloan Consortium, a nonprofit organization that promotes online learning. What will those students expect from colleges when they get there? Certainly they will want something innovative—more innovative than what colleges are offering now.

Colleges are only slowly waking up to the need for substantial change. Admissions officers who are members of a *Chronicle* panel expect significant changes over the next decade in the makeup of their student bodies. Of the 121 institutions that responded to a survey, two-thirds said that almost all of their students were full time and ages 18 to 25. Those characteristics will change. Only about half the institutions believe that in 2020 their enrollments will be primarily made up of traditional-age, full-time students. By 2020, almost a third of respondents said, students will be taking up to 60 percent of their courses entirely online. Now almost no students at those colleges take courses only online.

Who Will the Students Be?

It should come as no surprise that student bodies will increasingly be made up of members of minority groups. **At some point, probably just after 2020, minority students will outnumber whites on college campuses for the first time.** The average age of students will keep trending higher as expectations shift in favor of people going back to college again and again to get additional credentials to advance their careers or change to new ones.

The colleges that are doing the best right now at capturing that demographic are community colleges and for-profit institutions. Both sectors will continue to grow at a fast pace. The executive director of the Career College Association, Harris N. Miller, believes for-profit colleges will be educating 15 percent of all college students by 2020, compared with the 7 percent that they educate now.

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The most elite colleges will always have their constituencies and a ready supply of students looking for a traditional college education. Many flagship state institutions also have a similar built-in advantage: For students who cannot get into elite institutions or cannot afford them, the large, nearby public university will be their ideal. But the total group that attends those types of institutions makes up far less than half of collegegoers, and it is shrinking.

Community colleges and for-profit institutions should continue to thrive because of their reputations for convenience. The rest of colleges—regional public universities, small liberal-arts colleges, and private universities without national followings—can expect to compete for students based on price, convenience, and the perceived strengths of the institutions. They will need to constantly ask themselves “What is college?” and be constantly rethinking the answer if they want students to attend.