Three institutional priorities for driving positive change in higher education

How change today can position colleges and universities for future success

Change can be daunting but also beneficial. Amid the complex challenges facing higher education, colleges and universities have an opportunity to adapt, evolve, and focus on the future. Prospective students are questioning the value of higher education amid factors such as economic uncertainty, emerging technology, and an unclear path to employment. How will their student experience prepare them for a future that is difficult to envision? By focusing on the student experience and financial sustainability and preparing students for societal shifts, institutions can position their students and themselves for success.

IN BRIEF

- Future success is dependent on an institution's ability to adapt, evolve, and reprioritize based on factors like changing student needs, emerging technologies, and cultural shifts.

- Leading institutions are investing in their future by embracing positive change and approaching the challenges ahead as strategic opportunities.

- For many, navigating the road ahead begins with creating an informed student experience, attaining financial sustainability, and preparing their students and faculty for societal shifts.

Creating a more informed student experience

Proactively prepare for student expression on campus

Recent student action across campuses has revealed a cultural and social misalignment between students and institutional leadership. Maintaining an open discourse between the two groups can build trust and demonstrate a resilient and thoughtful campus culture that welcomes civic engagement, celebrates free speech, and listens to students' voices. Flipping the lens, it is also important for internal relationships to be intact during times of unrest. This includes engaging faculty, staff, and other necessary authorities or stakeholders to preemptively construct protocols that support responsible student expression during historical events like presidential elections, international conflicts, and cultural shifts.

Prioritize student health and well-being

Aligning with students' needs also means providing the necessary resources for them to live happily and healthily on campus. As health and well-being continue to be a growing concern for prospective students, leading institutions are adopting a systems approach to ensuring their students' physical and mental health is prioritized. But what students are asking for goes beyond the bounds of physical and mental health initiatives on campus and requires additional community and societal engagement. It's about building a culture of care where everyone feels empowered through their health — and although that starts with supporting individual health and well-being, its influence spans far beyond and into the community.

Bolstering financial sustainability

Focus on the entire student lifecycle

Because of multiple factors, including the evolving public perception of the value of a college degree and the rising cost of tuition, many colleges and universities are experiencing enrollment losses. While that is not the case at every institution, as some enrollment metrics are stable and even growing, each circumstance brings its own set of concerns. Regardless, successful student enrollment management begins with a dynamic, student-centered strategy. For example, many institutions are using student recruitment analytics, competitor assessments, and market research to understand prospective student trends, refine their positioning, and differentiate themselves in the market. These initiatives go beyond the classroom and apply to the entire student lifecycle — offering support in areas like financial aid, tailored onboarding programs, and efforts in areas that improve a student's quality of life on campus, such as athletics, housing, dining, and student affairs.

Bolster advancement programs

Forward-thinking institutions are making strategic investments in their advancement programs to drive growth in philanthropic support. While advancement is a relationship-based function, it is also a data-driven one. Using data to inform investments, staff allocation, program enhancements, constituent engagement, and strategic communications is the most effective way to seize opportunity and achieve institutional priorities.

While many colleges and universities collect significant amounts of program and constituent data, they often lack meaningful comparative data and high-performance benchmarks to guide their growth strategies. Data expertise and operational rigor are core differentiating factors for institutions looking to achieve deeper connections with alumni and other constituencies and attain new levels of transformational philanthropy.

Preparing students and faculty for societal shifts

Use AI to innovate how students and faculty engage

AI continues to disrupt and innovate the path of higher education, and leading institutions will have their fingers on the pulse to keep up with the technology and use it to help improve the student experience. The technology will — and in many ways, already has — changed how the world works. Providing students with the resources to learn and excel at using it will help prepare them for new and emerging career opportunities. In addition to using AI for student resources like chatbots and AI-guided lesson plans, institutions are also leveraging it on the back end for analytic insights that can help guide them in their decision making and prepare them for a future that is ever-changing.

Offer experiential learning opportunities to curriculums

Despite continuous societal shifts, such as the emergence of AI, the path forward for institutions is complicated but navigable. Breaking down legacy silos that inhibit change and providing students with more engaging and memorable learning opportunities will help institutions look ahead and in the same direction as their student body. By emphasizing tailored programs that align with a student's desired career path, institutions can help students prepare for the political, economic, and socio-economic challenges that lie ahead and will shape the world in which they live.

The path to progress

The complexities higher education faces today help paint a bigger picture for what's to come for many colleges and universities. Whether an institution prioritizes creating an informed student experience, attaining financial sustainability, or building initiatives to help students and institutions navigate societal shifts, the path forward is clear. Leading institutions will approach these challenges as opportunities and combat them with forward-thinking initiatives. They will break the mold of traditional silos, adapt to the evolving needs of the world, and empower their students, faculty, and staff to succeed by driving positive change.

HURON

huronconsultinggroup.com