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CONTENTS

June 2026



10

Celebrating Higher Ed Heroes

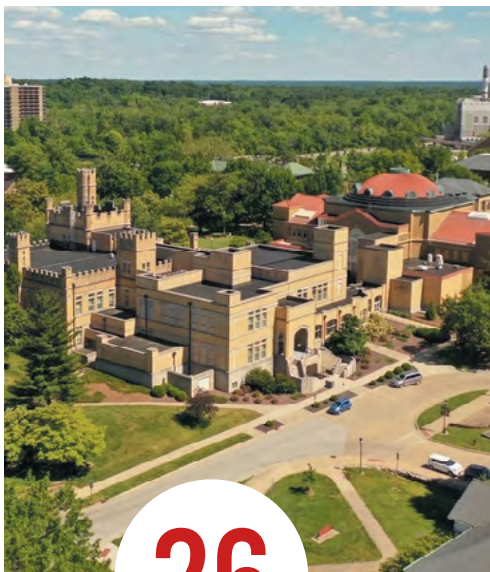
Honoring the people who power higher education.



18

The Accreditation Fight

Washington is turning a quiet system into a political battleground.



26

Op-Ed: From Climate to Compensation

Advancing equity through systemwide action at Southern Illinois University.



28

The End of SAVE

Millions of borrowers face uncertainty as the SAVE plan ends.

7

In Brief

12

Op-Ed

Student success depends on more than the classroom.

14

Recognizing Equity Initiatives

Seattle Colleges is honored.

16

Op-Ed

Why fraternities and sororities should sue their own.

22

Leaders in Training

A new model for building community college leadership.

24

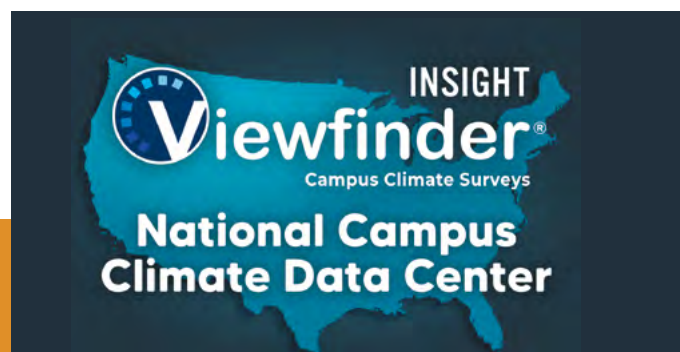
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SPECIAL REPORT

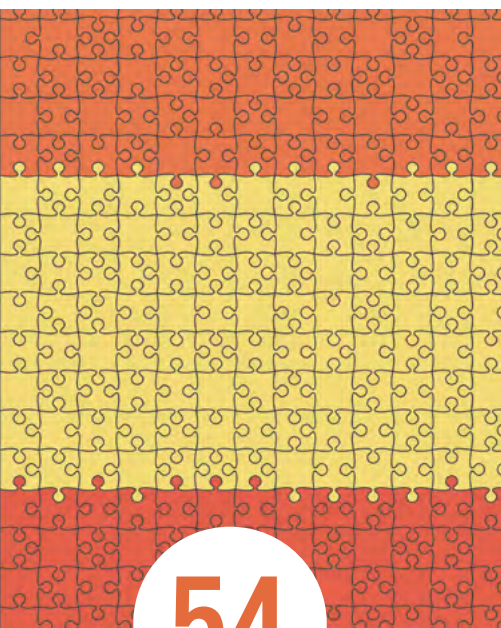


32

Cover Story: The 2026 Insight Into Academia Top Colleges for Innovation Award

From student experiences to administrative systems, these 2026 award winners are reimagining how higher education is designed, delivered, and led.

• Student Support



54

Designing Student Success

Colleges redesign systems to support neurodiverse learners.



64

Navigating Without a Map

The absence of "college knowledge" puts first-gen students at a disadvantage.

58

New Orientation Strategies

Redesigning first-year experiences.

60

Oregon's Campus Lifelines

College benefit navigators connect students to food, housing, and more.

62

No Application Needed

North Carolina's direct admission program sees record participation.



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TRIO Programs Caught in Anti-DEI Crackdown

For decades, federal TRIO programs have served as a lifeline for low-income and first-generation college students—providing tutoring, financial counseling, and academic support at more than 1,000 institutions nationwide. Now, those programs are caught in the crossfire of the Trump administration's broader effort to reshape federal education spending.

The administration withheld \$660 million of the \$1.19 billion allocated to TRIO in fiscal year 2025, canceling or rejecting roughly 100 grants, while delaying thousands of others. The primary reason cited for cancellations: program descriptions that referenced diversity, equity, and inclusion goals or gender ratios.

During the government shutdown last fall, Education Secretary Linda McMahon went further, eliminating the very office within the Department of Education responsible for administering TRIO grants.

More than 650,000 students rely on TRIO services each year. The programs—which include Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student

Support Services, and several others—were designed specifically for those who face the steepest barriers to higher education.

TRIO's roots trace back to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and have since expanded into eight distinct programs serving students at every stage of the college pipeline.

The administration's actions have not gone unchallenged. Attorneys general from 21 states and Washington, DC, filed briefs opposing the grant cancellations, and the Council for Opportunity in Education secured a preliminary injunction. Some funding has since been released as a result, though the broader landscape remains uncertain.

The uncertainty may only deepen. President Trump's proposed FY2026 budget calls for eliminating TRIO entirely—a move that would end a federal investment that, between 2021 and 2024 alone, directed more than \$233 million to California institutions, \$132.7 million to Texas, and tens of millions more to states across the South, Midwest, and beyond.

Research has shown that TRIO funding is heavily concentrated at public colleges serving small student populations, as well as at minority-serving institutions that enroll large populations of first-generation students and students of color.

Supporters of TRIO argue that stripping funding under the banner of anti-DEI enforcement misrepresents what these programs actually do: connect disadvantaged students with the academic and financial resources they need to earn a degree. Critics of the administration's approach note that using DEI-related language as a disqualifying criterion effectively penalizes institutions for serving the very students TRIO was explicitly created to help.

For now, affected institutions and students are left navigating a system in flux—waiting on court decisions, monitoring budget negotiations, and wondering whether a program that has shaped college access for generations will survive the current political environment. ●

Ohio State Makes AI Fluency a Graduation Requirement for Undergraduates

The Ohio State University is requiring every undergraduate student to develop proficiency in artificial intelligence, embedding AI education across all majors beginning with the Class of 2029.

Launched last fall, the AI Fluency initiative mandates that all incoming students complete a generative AI course and a series of workshops focused on real-world applications. The goal, university officials say, is to produce graduates who are fluent not only in their chosen field but in how AI can be responsibly applied within it.

"Through AI Fluency, Ohio State students will be 'bilingual'—fluent in both their major field of study and the application of AI in that area," says Ravi V. Bellamkonda, PhD, the university's president.

The initiative comes as AI skills have become increasingly sought after in the job market. In the last decade, the number of U.S. job listings requesting AI proficiency has climbed 619%, according to a recent analysis by the Brookings Institution. In the past year alone, AI-related job postings increased by 103%.

Some incoming students have already expressed enthusiasm for the practical benefits AI could offer, particularly when navigating demanding coursework in math and science.

Faculty, meanwhile, have voiced hope that students learn to use the technology as a complement to critical thinking rather than as a replacement—a concern that extends well beyond campus. A recent Pew Research Center survey found that 53%

of U.S. adults believe AI will worsen people's ability to think creatively.

Supporters in the private sector point to tangible productivity gains. Luis von Ahn, CEO of the language-learning platform Duolingo, told CBS News that while AI has not eliminated any full-time positions at the company, it has dramatically accelerated content production—enabling the creation of nearly 150 new courses in a single year after the company's first 100 took more than a decade to build.

Ohio State is betting that early, structured exposure to AI will give its graduates a competitive edge. Students interviewed by CBS suggested that peers at schools without similar offerings might find themselves at a disadvantage entering the workforce. ●



At ATSU, diversity means more than **HUE.**

Founded in 1892, A.T. Still University of Health Sciences (ATSU) has built a legacy of excellence and inclusion as the founding school of osteopathic medicine, dedicated to preparing healthcare professionals who serve underserved populations.

ATSU is proud to continue this history as a recipient of the 2025 Health Professions Higher Education Excellence and Distinction Champion award for the ninth consecutive year. The University offers an array of graduate-level degrees in medical, dental, and health science programs, on campus and online.

Earning high marks in the 2025 Best Graduate Schools for Medicine rankings by U.S. News & World Report, ATSU's Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine ranked No. 1 for graduates practicing in rural areas, and ATSU's School of Osteopathic Medicine in Arizona ranked No. 1 for graduates practicing in primary care.

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Pennsylvania State System Pilots Course-Sharing Initiative

Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) is developing a program that would allow students to take specialized or advanced courses offered at other PASSHE universities without transferring or traveling to a different campus, officials announced.

In July 2025, the PASSHE Foundation secured a \$536,000 grant to fund the early stages of the project. The money will allow 165 additional faculty members to complete intensive, yearlong training in research-based teaching strategies designed to support course sharing. More than 500 PASSHE faculty have already finished similar training through the Association of College and University Educators while continuing to teach their regular course loads.

PASSHE Chancellor Christopher Fiorentino framed the initiative as an equity issue as much as an academic one. "Course sharing will bring students access to more high-quality, specialized courses at other universities, no matter where they are in our system," he says.

The program is expected to benefit

students at rural campuses in particular, where course offerings may be constrained by smaller faculty sizes and tighter budgets. For some students in those communities, advocates say, access to a broader academic catalog could factor into whether they pursue college at all. Developing skilled workers in regions facing workforce shortages is also a stated goal of the initiative.

Diana Rogers-Adkinson, PASSHE vice chancellor and chief academic officer, described the program as a supplement to—not a substitute for—the traditional college experience. "Course sharing reflects PASSHE's mission to provide a quality higher education at the lowest possible cost as we meet students where they are geographically and academically," she says. "This can never replace the on-campus classroom experience, but it gives students an additional option to take specialized or advanced courses offered at other campuses."

To make cross-campus enrollment logistically viable, PASSHE is building

a unified student information platform that consolidates course registration, financial aid, tuition payments, and academic progress tracking across all 10 universities. The system has already been deployed at most campuses, with a full rollout expected next year.

Pilot programs are currently underway, developed with guidance from a faculty-led advisory council and university provosts. PASSHE is also collaborating with peer systems nationally through a workgroup under the National Association of System Heads, which awarded the initiative a \$10,000 grant in 2024. The State System plans to publish a course-sharing guide that other university systems can use.

Shelley Scherer, president and CEO of the PASSHE Foundation, suggests the initiative could put Pennsylvania on the national map. "PASSHE is well-positioned to be a national leader in designing course sharing strategies, with its universities in rural and suburban communities," she says. ●

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HIGHER ED HEROES

Higher education is powered by people.



Behind every thriving campus are faculty and staff members who mentor students, build community, create opportunity, and lead with purpose. Their impact often extends far beyond the classroom or office, shaping lives, strengthening institutions, and connecting campuses to the broader world. Insight Into Academia is excited to highlight this month's Higher Ed Heroes, spotlighting the special individuals who make a meaningful difference at colleges across the country.

We celebrate the people who make contributions that strengthen higher education from within. Whether guiding students toward career success, building inclusive spaces, mentoring first-generation scholars, advancing innovation, or establishing community partnerships, Higher Ed Heroes exists to recognize them for their contributions.

Ricardo Padilla, Jr. Santa Clara University



Ricardo Padilla, Jr., programs director for mission, culture, and student engagement at Santa Clara University (SCU), has been recognized as a Higher Ed Hero for his tireless work building connection and belonging across campus.

His efforts go beyond event planning. From cultural celebrations like Día de los Muertos to diversity dinners to student gatherings at sporting events, Ricardo approaches every opportunity as a chance to strengthen relationships and foster a shared sense of community. What sets him apart isn't just what he organizes. It's how he shows up. Colleagues and students describe him as someone who is always willing to step in, listen, and support, no matter how full his plate is.

In a higher education landscape where departments can easily operate in silos, Ricardo works to bridge those gaps, creating opportunities for people to connect across roles, experiences, and perspectives. For students navigating a large campus, that kind of presence can be transformative. It turns unfamiliar into familiar. It turns a campus into a home.

In his own words: "It is always such an honor getting to work with and for such amazing students at SCU, helping the next generation achieve the next step in their dreams and make a positive impact in society."

That perspective is what makes Padilla, Jr., a Higher Ed Hero.

Douglas Coffin Miami University



Douglas Coffin, PhD, professor in the department of chemical, paper, and biomedical engineering at Miami University, has been recognized as a Higher Ed Hero for more than 30 years of dedicated teaching, mentorship, and leadership in engineering education.

Over the course of his career, Coffin has taught everything from foundational engineering concepts to advanced seminars, always with an approach that extends beyond course content. He invests in students as individuals, encouraging them to pursue internships, research, and study-abroad experiences that expand their perspective and prepare them for careers in a rapidly evolving field. His mentorship is intentional and tailored, and for many students it becomes a defining part of their academic journey.

His contributions extend well beyond the classroom. He has served as Graduate Director, contributed to curriculum development, and served as Editor-in-Chief of the TAPPI Journal, helping advance research and elevate his discipline on a national stage.

Yet what stands out most is how he sums up on his own legacy.

In his own words: "Reflecting on 30 years as an educator, I believe any impact I have made is a reflection of the students, colleagues, and sponsors who have challenged and inspired me."

It is a perspective grounded in humility, one that recognizes success as something shared and built through relationships. And that is what makes Coffin a Higher Ed Hero.

Tara Jenkins Arizona State University



Tara Jenkins, an award manager at Arizona State University's (ASU) office of research and sponsored programs administration, has been recognized as a Higher Ed Hero for her essential role in keeping the university's research enterprise running at the highest level.

Her work spans departments, teams, and systems, supporting a vast portfolio of externally funded research projects that require precision, deep institutional knowledge, and a thorough command of federal regulations. It is complex, high-stakes work that rarely draws public attention. But its impact is enormous.

Colleagues describe Jenkins as a pillar of the organization. She is known for her integrity and expertise, and equally for her willingness to mentor others, share knowledge, and elevate everyone around her. Her influence extends beyond her immediate role through university-wide working groups, systems improvements, and a sustained commitment to ensuring that faculty and students can focus on what they do best: advancing research and discovery.

In her own words: "Our work in research administration at ASU serves to empower faculty and students in their research endeavors, which leads to improving the lives of not only our local community, but also the world."

That commitment to collective impact over individual recognition is exactly what makes Jenkins a Higher Ed Hero.

Know someone who deserves to be recognized?

Submitting a nomination takes just a few minutes. Simply share the nominee's name, institution, and a brief reflection on the impact they've made. You can also upload a short video directly from your phone if you'd like to amplify their story across our social channels.

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your Higher Ed
Hero here:





Student Success Depends on More Than the Classroom

How student-centered leadership creates the conditions students need to thrive

By Eric A. Weldy, EdD

When colleges and universities

struggle with student retention, engagement, or well-being, the focus often turns inward to the classroom. Teaching and learning are, of course, central to higher education's mission.

Yet for many students, whether they persist, belong, and graduate is shaped just as powerfully beyond the lecture hall—in advising meetings, residence communities, counseling sessions, student organizations, career offices, cultural centers, and moments of quiet uncertainty about whether they truly fit in.

This reality underscores a critical truth for our field: student affairs is not supplemental to the academic mission. It is central to it.

Supporting student success requires more than strong programs or committed professionals. It requires leadership—at many levels—that intentionally builds the conditions in which innovation, collaboration, and student-centered work can thrive.

Innovation in student affairs does not happen simply because someone asks staff to be creative or to do more with less. It happens when people are given clarity, capacity, and trust to do meaningful work.

Those conditions matter whether someone is leading a division, coordinating a program, supervising students, or working directly on the front lines with those who need support the most.

One of the clearest signals of institutional values is how resources are stewarded. Budgets are moral documents. They demonstrate priorities more clearly than any mission statement.

For student affairs professionals, understanding how resources are

allocated—and advocating for alignment with student needs—is an essential leadership responsibility.

Responsible stewardship goes beyond balancing accounts. It asks harder questions: Are we investing in services students use? Are we responding to emerging challenges such as mental health concerns, basic needs insecurity, career preparation, and engagement? Are equity and access visible not only in our language, but in our spending?

collaboratively, grounded in assessment, and informed by the lived experiences of students and staff.

Clarity does not end once a plan is written. It must be communicated consistently and translated into goals that staff understand and can influence. When people know where an organization is headed, they can exercise judgment, adapt their work, and align decisions with shared priorities. Clear communication reduces confusion and

When institutions invest in staffing, training, tools, space, and technology, they create room for professionals to test ideas, assess outcomes, and improve practice. Creativity requires capacity.

Equally important is capacity. Innovation cannot be sustained in perpetual crisis mode. When staff are under-resourced and over-extended, the focus naturally shifts to survival rather than improvement.

When institutions invest in staffing, training, tools, space, and technology, they create room for professionals to test ideas, assess outcomes, and improve practice. Creativity requires capacity.

Strategic planning helps turn values into action. A meaningful plan should provide direction, establish priorities, and help individuals see how their daily work contributes to broader student success goals.

Too often, plans remain abstract or disconnected from practice. The most effective plans are created

empowers action at every level.

Advocacy is another condition that enables innovation. Student affairs professionals are often among the strongest advocates for students, particularly those who are navigating complex systems or personal challenges.

Advocacy also means making the role student services plays in retention, learning and belonging visible, and ensuring those contributions are reflected in institutional conversations.

At the same time, advocacy must extend to staff. Many professionals carry the emotional labor of supporting students in crisis. Sustainable student success requires sustainable working conditions. Leadership includes setting realistic expectations, recognizing effort, and ensuring people feel

supported, not depleted.

No student affairs unit or role operates in isolation. Students experience the institution as a whole and not as separate divisions. Supporting them effectively requires collaboration across academic affairs, enrollment management, facilities, finance, human resources and community partners. When professionals work across organizational boundaries, students encounter a more coherent and humane institution.

Data also plays an important role in this work. Assessment helps us understand who we are reaching, who we are missing, and where gaps persist. Utilizing participation data, climate surveys, learning outcomes, and student feedback allows us to make more informed decisions. Data should not be used only to justify existing work, but to ask better questions about how to improve it.

Yet numbers alone never tell the full story. Behind every data point is a student's lived experience. The strongest practice combines evidence with empathy—listening carefully, recognizing patterns, and responding with both urgency and care.

Culture ultimately determines whether innovation is sustained. Collaborative environments do not emerge by accident. They are shaped by everyday interactions—whether ideas are welcomed, failures treated as learning opportunities, and people trusted to contribute. Leadership is not confined to titles; it shows up in how professionals support one another, share credit, and remain committed to collective goals.

Belonging, too, must be understood as an outcome of daily practices. A welcoming environment is reflected in policies, facilities, training, supervision, communication, and accountability.

It requires courage to address barriers and to engage honestly in difficult conversations when they arise.

Higher education is navigating profound change. The challenges we face demand more than tradition or goodwill. They require intentional leadership at all levels—leadership that aligns values, resources, and action around student success.

In student affairs, our work is often most visible during moments of crisis. But our most important work happens long before that point—when we build environments that help students flourish rather than merely endure. That is where innovation takes root and where higher education's promise is most fully realized.

Eric A. Weldy, EdD is vice chancellor for Student Affairs at Indiana University Indianapolis and a member of the Insight Into Academia Editorial Board.

SWARTHMORE

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY. DEVELOPING LEADERS.



At Swarthmore College, we are committed to cultivating a campus where differences in identity and experiences are celebrated as an integral part of developing future global leaders. We commemorate our continuous efforts to build a diverse, inclusive, and equitable working and learning environment that encourages dialogue, education, and support.





SEATTLE COLLEGES RECEIVES NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR LONGSTANDING EQUITY INITIATIVES

Seattle Colleges has been named the recipient of the 2026 Institutional Excellence Award for a two-year institution by the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), recognizing the system's sustained efforts to advance equity and inclusion across its campuses.

The annual award honors colleges that demonstrate measurable progress in building and maintaining comprehensive diversity initiatives including leadership, curricular reform, professional development, accountability practices, and community engagement.

Seattle Colleges' recognition reflects a broad, systemwide approach rather than a single program. D'Andre Fisher, associate vice chancellor of the Division for Access, Community, and Opportunity and senior equity officer for Seattle Colleges, framed the award as a collective achievement across the

six member institutions.

"Winning an award of this magnitude means our beloved students, staff, faculty, administrators, external members, trustees, chancellor, presidents, and the entire Seattle Colleges community, are being seen," Fisher said, pointing to years of work aimed at building an anti-racist, anti-bias institutional culture.

That work spans multiple initiatives designed to address systemic barriers and improve student outcomes. Programs such as Guided Pathways, TRIO, Seattle Promise, and Project Sisterhood focus on expanding access and retention, while faculty development efforts—including the Critical Pedagogy Institute and a cross-institutional mentorship program for faculty of color—support more inclusive teaching practices.

Additional efforts range from workforce education and student leadership programs to identity-

based collectives and multicultural engagement spaces.

Institutional planning has also shaped the system's approach. In December 2024, the Seattle Colleges Board of Trustees approved a 10-year strategic plan developed with input from more than 1,000 stakeholders, including students, employees, and community members. The plan outlines priorities tied to equity, student success, and long-term institutional growth.

State policy has further reinforced these efforts. Washington lawmakers have enacted measures requiring diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism training and assessments across higher education, alongside increased funding for equity-focused initiatives.

By embedding these initiatives into its structure, planning, and daily operations, Seattle Colleges' approach aligns with NADOHE's emphasis on sustained, measurable impact at the institutional level. ●

Celebrating Inclusive, Institutional Excellence



WHAT DOES WINNING THIS AWARD MEAN TO YOU AND SEATTLE COLLEGES?

Winning an award of this magnitude on behalf of the entire Seattle Colleges community and being recognized for our commitment and dedication over the years means we are being seen as we have strived to become—an antiracist and anti-bias institution that leads with racial equity in our policies, infrastructure, and culture.

We are fortunate to be able to advance this work with the support of our governor, mayor, state attorney general, and the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. Our state has offered tremendous support and historic investments in our college system's equity efforts with the passage of Senate bills requiring diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism training at all state institutions of higher education.

Our strategic plan acknowledges our proud history, short-term challenges and opportunities while identifying future directions, aspirations, and operational strategies. It also affirms our fundamental mission: to prepare each student for a successful life and to work in a diverse, global, and dynamic society.

We salute and extend a heartfelt appreciation to so many of our beloved Seattle Colleges colleagues, students, staff, faculty, administrators, external members, trustees, unions, our chancellor, presidents, and the entire Seattle Colleges community for the work seen and unseen that has been and continues to be instrumental in earning this recognition.

WHAT INITIATIVES OR PROGRAMS DO YOU FEEL WERE MOST INSTRUMENTAL IN EARNING THIS RECOGNITION?

Seattle Colleges has a deeply rooted legacy in social justice and activism even

before "DEI" was an acronym. There are many initiatives, programs, and people over the years that invested their time and talents that have contributed to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment that benefits everyone.

"I wholeheartedly pay homage to the past and current Access, Community, and Opportunity team members, our Chancellor, Presidents, and Board Members for their unwavering support and leadership. I offer profound gratitude to my beloved family, Granny, students, mentors, teachers, community members, spiritual leaders, friends, colleagues from Seattle Colleges, NADOHE, DECO, OU, and all those who've paved the way before me, but most importantly our ancestors and elders for being the north star. It's a true calling, not just a career choice.

Àșe!"

D'Andre R. Fisher

Just to name a few of the programs that have contributed to our success include Seattle Colleges' Advancement and Foundation, Guided Pathways, College Spark, DEEL, student and staff community collectives, identity spaces, Seattle Promise, Project Baldwin, Project Sisterhood, BE-STEM, Student Leadership Engagement and Multicultural Programs, Academy of Rising Educators, Centrals Black Thinktank, Umoja, Climate Justice,

Seattle Colleges' D'Andre Fisher, associate vice chancellor of the Division for Access, Community, and Opportunity and senior equity officer, speaks with Insight Into Academia about the college system winning the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education 2026 Institutional Excellence Award for a two-year institution.

Student Life Food Pantry Programs, Workforce Education Departments, AANAPISI Programs, TRIO, International Programs, Anti-Opressive Universal Design, Cohort Cross-Institutional Faculty of Color Mentorship Program, and the Critical Pedagogy Institute.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER TO OTHER TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS LOOKING TO STRENGTHEN THEIR INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE EFFORTS?

I'm reminded of an ancient African word, "Ubuntu," meaning "humanity to others." It is often described as reminding us that "I am what I am because of who we all are."

This work is done from the heart, centering the communities we serve. This work is not flashy; it is complex and system-changing. There are no quick fixes transforming deeply embedded inequities with a system or culture.

It's not about rolling out one-time initiatives, training, workshops, or sending out a press release. No amount of community messaging will work if the community doesn't feel seen, heard, valued, or have trust in the stewards leading the work. You can't serve our constituents if you have not built intentional trust to lead them on this journey.

We start as an institution and the "I" of anti-racism work—rather than placing the burden on our students. We must genuinely seek to change our systems and selves, or we will continue to see performative outcomes, backpedaling in the face of political rhetoric and allowing noise from the chaos to be the driver of the change.



Preventing Hazing

Why fraternities and sororities should sue their own

By Robin R. Means Coleman, PhD

The images seemed drawn from a horror film: 56 male pledges assembled in a darkened basement, most shirtless, their bodies smeared with ketchup, mustard, alcohol, and many are blindfolded.

With body cameras recording, University of Iowa campus police and city first responders (responding to a fire alarm) captured a scene of hazing inside the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity house.

Since its release in February 2026, the video has circulated widely across social media and news platforms, garnering tens of millions of views.

What seized public attention was not merely the grotesque spectacle, but what it revealed: college students enduring a range of abuses, in secrecy and without meaningful oversight at the hands of fraternity members.

When questioned about their safety, the pledges responded with protective silence. The footage offered a rare, stark view of hazing—what Stophazing.org defines as the humiliations, degradations, abuses, and endangering activities that individuals endure regardless of ostensible consent.

Such exposure is unusual. Hazing typically becomes visible only in its aftermath.

In 2025 alone, multiple high-profile incidents surfaced: a Southern University student died after being punched in the chest during an Omega Psi Phi fraternity incident.

The University of Georgia investigated Sigma Chi fraternity for hitting pledges and coercing excessive alcohol consumption, as well as Pi Kappa Phi fraternity for burning pledges with cigarettes.

Indiana University suspended



Screenshots from the University of Iowa's Alpha Delta Phi fraternity house video captured in the basement. (Photo courtesy Johnson County District Court)

fraternity social events following reports of extreme alcohol use, various physical and mental abuses, and even a student's hospitalization. Hazing is not confined to fraternities. Databases such as HazingInfo.org document its persistence across organizational types and genders.

Yet institutional responses have followed a familiar script—suspend the campus chapter, issue a statement disavowing hazing, and proceed with an investigation with varying degrees of transparency.

Meaningful accountability tends to emerge through litigation initiated by victims or their families, prompting organizations and universities to shift into reputational and financial risk management. Even then, responsibility is diffuse, with institutions navigating

a crises while individual actors evade lasting consequences.

Against this backdrop, a recent development marks a dramatic rupture of Greek life collegiate culture. In January 2026, the national Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity sued Rutgers University former chapter members after a 19-year-old student was hospitalized in critical condition following electrocution during a hazing incident.

The decision to separate from its own members and then pursue legal action against them fractures Greek life's longstanding norms.

At first glance, such a move feels disloyal, violating the ethos of fraternity itself. Greek letter organizations are structured around practices of kinship—brotherhood and sisterhood—premised on loyalty and a lifelong bond.

Of course, this framing of familial connection obscures a greater truth in that hazing itself is the deeper betrayal of solidarity. By turning inward and assigning legal culpability to its former members, Alpha Sigma Phi signaled that this ethos will no longer function as a shield for hazing and other abusive conduct.

The implication is significant, as internal discipline, chapter closure, and individual member suspension/termination are not the terminus of accountability, but the beginning. Properly understood, intra-organizational lawsuits need not be paradoxical, contradicting Greek life's ideals.

Such actions are a test of their seriousness to advance credible mechanisms for accountability within a system where commitments to safety have been symbolic and have failed regulation.

The crucial question becomes: is this unprecedented lawsuit a signal of real hazing policing and accountability on the part of a Greek letter organization?

Incorporating civil litigation into a punitive repertoire alongside suspension, expulsion, and criminal prosecution introduces a more robust, multi-pronged approach. There is no single magic wand approach to address hazing.

A range of strategies is particularly useful given the inconsistent meting out of sanctions across institutional and legal domains, given the ambiguity surrounding consent in hazing contexts.

At the same time, civil lawsuits are not without ambiguity. They may function as instruments of organizational safeguarding, signaling proactive governance while strategically deflecting liability.

By framing hazing as the product of "rogue" individuals, organizations risk obscuring the structural and cultural conditions that enable such behaviors, thereby relocating blame rather than reducing harm.

In 2024, Pi Kappa Alpha's national organization announced it would bring civil action against several individuals at the University of Virginia including its chapter president, seeking damages

for financial and reputational harm—an action that similarly blurs the line between accountability and risk management.

The question, then, is not whether fraternities and sororities should sue their members, but under what conditions will such actions contribute to meaningful change.

Lawsuits should be paired with transparent reforms including clear enforcement mechanisms and incentives that reward compliance to anti-hazing rules. Absent these measures, litigation is merely theater.

To address the skeptics in the room, no matter the motives behind such litigation, lawsuits can generate a meaningful deterrent effect. The prospect of personal financial liability and reputational damage introduces a new calculus for potential perpetrators. As such, litigation operates not only as punishment but as a preemptive prescription.

Critics may also argue that escalating penalties will drive hazing further underground. Yet secrecy is already a defining feature of the practice. The Alpha Delta Phi Iowa footage—pledges confined to a darkened basement, hidden from view—illustrates the point starkly.

Introducing the threat of civil liability may not eliminate hazing, but it raises its costs in ways that could disrupt the behavior, even at its margins.

Whether other organizations will follow Alpha Sigma Phi's lead is an open question. Internal resistance is quite likely. Yet, the status quo is untenable.

If Greek life is to endure within contemporary higher education, it must develop more effective mechanisms of self-governance. Suing one's own members may not be a comprehensive solution, but it represents a potentially significant intervention in a culture that has long resisted meaningful reform.

Robin R. Means Coleman, PhD is a Professor of Media Studies and of African American and African Studies at the University of Virginia and a member of the Insight Into Academia Editorial Board.



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The Quiet Infrastructure Under Siege

How the Trump Administration Is Remaking Higher Ed Accreditation

By Erik Cliburn





For decades, higher education accreditation agencies operated largely out of public view, a technocratic system of peer review that determined which colleges could access federal financial aid and which could not.

Today, it has become one of the most contested arenas in American education policy, as the Trump administration pursues a sweeping restructuring that critics say has less to do with quality assurance than with political control.

The administration's campaign began in earnest with President Trump's April 2025 executive order directing the Department of Education (ED) to expand recognition of new accrediting agencies, make it easier for institutions to change accreditors, and strip accreditation standards the administration characterizes as "unlawfully" promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Since then, the pace has accelerated considerably.

In February 2026, ED issued an interpretive rule designed to lower barriers for new accrediting agencies seeking federal recognition, a nonbinding but symbolically charged move. Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent framed it as a needed correction.

"The accreditation market has been stagnant for far too long, and this interpretive rule will help the Department bring new accreditors into the market," Kent said. "Increased competition will spur innovation and refocus accreditors on what matters most: ensuring students are prepared for good jobs after graduation."

In March, Kent escalated further, sending warning letters to two accrediting bodies, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, which oversees roughly 500 colleges, and the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education.

The letters directed them to eliminate DEI-related standards that he argues violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Notably, both agencies had already suspended those standards following Trump's executive orders.

Kent warned that federal officials could pull recognition from either agency if they enforced any suspended DEI standards before formally eliminating them and directed each to submit two monitoring reports over the coming year.

"No accrediting agency may place institutions in such a no-win scenario where an institution must choose between violating federal law or violating the accreditor's standard," he wrote.

Higher education observers pushed back sharply. Heather Perfetti, president of the Middle States Commission, expressed bewilderment.

"The Title VI analysis seemingly stems from misplaced reliance on language that is not reflective of our immediate steps to suspend any and all criteria within our standards reflecting diversity, equity, and inclusion following President Trump's Executive Orders," she said. "I am surprised because we have demonstrated unequivocally and repeatedly that institutions are expected to follow federal and state law."

Other critics characterized ED's posture as treating voluntary compliance as an admission of guilt, a move many described as an abuse of process.

The administration's most ambitious vehicle for change is the Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization negotiated rulemaking committee, known as AIM, which convened for the first time in April.

The draft regulations it produced, spanning 151 pages, would represent some of the most significant changes to accreditation in decades. Among the key proposals were new federal expectations tying accreditors to "intellectual diversity" standards and student outcome metrics, requirements that institutions accept transfer credits toward general education and a streamlined process for recognizing new accrediting agencies.

The committee's first week of deliberations did not go smoothly for higher ed advocates. Negotiators had worked through fewer than 100

A New Accreditor, A New Warning

As the Trump administration works to reshape accreditation from within, a parallel effort is taking shape on the outside.

The Commission for Public Higher Education (CPHE), is a new accrediting body seeking to govern public university systems in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and the University of South Carolina system. Critics say it represents the next phase of a coordinated campaign to bring higher education to its heel.

Todd Wolfson, president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and vice president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), was unsparing in his assessment of CPHE in a March 2026 statement. "Accreditation must remain independent of political control," he wrote. "The CPHE is not."

Wolfson argued that the new body's proposed standards are too vague and politically driven to protect genuine educational quality, and that its "intellectual diversity" requirement appears designed to pressure institutions into teaching ideologies that lack scientific or academic support.

He also noted that AAUP declined to submit an official comment during the public comment period, concluding that doing so risked lending legitimacy to what he called "an illegitimate enterprise."

The stakes, Wolfson argued, are straightforward. Because accreditation determines access to federal financial aid, a politically aligned accreditor can threaten universities with the loss of billions of dollars if they resist ideological pressure. "The danger," he warned, "is real."

of the draft's 151 pages, and reported amendments were structural rather than substantive.

Kent himself set the tone early, telling the committee that while ED was "open to new ideas," the explicit goal of the reforms was to "upend higher education," according to the American Council on Education (ACE).

Jon Fansmith, ACE's senior vice president of government relations and national engagement, had offered a preview of that posture weeks earlier, when Kent appeared at ACE's annual conference and suggested that higher ed leaders would need to work through the stages of grief before reaching acceptance of the administration's direction.

He responded pointedly, saying acceptance meant "partnership, not acquiescence." He warned that emerging proposals around intellectual diversity could require institutions to survey faculty and submit to third-

party curriculum reviews—federal overreach, he argued—that would compromise institutional autonomy.

The committee's structure adds another layer of concern. If the group cannot reach consensus, ED is free to finalize its proposed regulations as written, a dynamic that gives the administration considerably more leverage than in previous rulemaking sessions. A second and final round of negotiations concluded in late May.

The potential consequences for students are concrete. Accreditors serve as gatekeepers to federal financial aid, including Pell Grants and student loans.

If an accreditor is stripped of federal recognition, the institutions it oversees could lose access to that funding entirely. In an industry already under financial stress, with federal student loan debt now exceeding \$1.7 trillion and some institutions announcing significant

workforce reductions, the prospect of destabilized accreditation adds another layer of uncertainty.

AAUP has argued that the administration's real aim is not quality but control, replacing peer-driven oversight with a structure that allows the government to dictate curriculum and faculty appointments.

New America, a nonprofit public policy think tank, has warned separately that loosening accreditor-switching rules could allow underperforming institutions to evade accountability while continuing to collect federal aid.

Whether the AIM committee reaches consensus or the administration moves to finalize its rules unilaterally, the outcome will reshape an accreditation system that has, for better or worse, been the backbone of American higher education for generations. ●

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Elevating Voices. Inspiring Action.

USC and Southwestern College Team Up to Build Next Generation of Community College Leaders

By Erik Cliburn

A new graduate education

initiative is bringing one of the nation's most prestigious universities directly to a community college campus in Chula Vista, Calif.—and its backers say the stakes extend well beyond the two partners.

University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education (USC Rossier) has partnered with Southwestern College to launch the Community College Innovation Scholars Program, a three-year, \$4.2 million pilot that will allow up to 120 Southwestern faculty, staff, and administrators to earn graduate degrees without leaving their jobs or community.

Beginning in fall 2026, participants can pursue either a Master of Education in Learning Design with AI and Emerging Technologies or a Doctor of Education in Organizational Change and Leadership.

USC Rossier faculty will deliver coursework through a hybrid format—combining online instruction, in-person classes at Southwestern's Chula Vista campus, and immersive weekend experiences at USC's University Park Campus in Los Angeles.

The program is designed with the realities of working professionals in mind.

"It's hard when you're a working professional to be able to commute to USC to take classes," Pedro Noguera, PhD, dean of USC Rossier, said at the launch of the program. "A lot of those classes can be offered online. But we can enhance them with immersive learning experiences where we bring our faculty to Southwestern. That's the model we're creating here."

That model draws on a template USC has used internationally.

"We have global programs where we bring our faculty to places like Singapore, Finland, South Africa, and Brazil," Noguera said. "Why not



Superintendent/President of Southwestern College Mark Sanchez (left) and USC Rossier Dean Pedro Noguera (right) were awarded a certificate of recognition at the kickoff event for the Community College Innovation Scholars Program from Rosanna Javier (center), a representative from the office of California State Sen. Stephen Padilla. (Photo/Courtesy of Southwestern College)

Southwestern Community College?"

The urgency behind the initiative is rooted in the data. California's community college system—the largest system of higher education in the country with 116 institutions—serves more than 2.1 million students annually.

Roughly one-third of all California high school graduates begin their higher education journey at a community college, making them a critical entry point, particularly for first-generation students, low-income learners, and working adults. Yet student completion rates hover at around 30%.

Leadership instability compounds the challenge. As of 2025, the average tenure for a community college leader had dropped to just 4.3 years, with limited succession pipelines and few meaningful pathways for professional advancement among faculty and staff.

"Addressing student success at scale requires parallel investment in the people and leadership structures that shape institutional change, and that's one major aspect of what we aim to do with this new program," Noguera said.

Each scholar in the program will complete an applied research

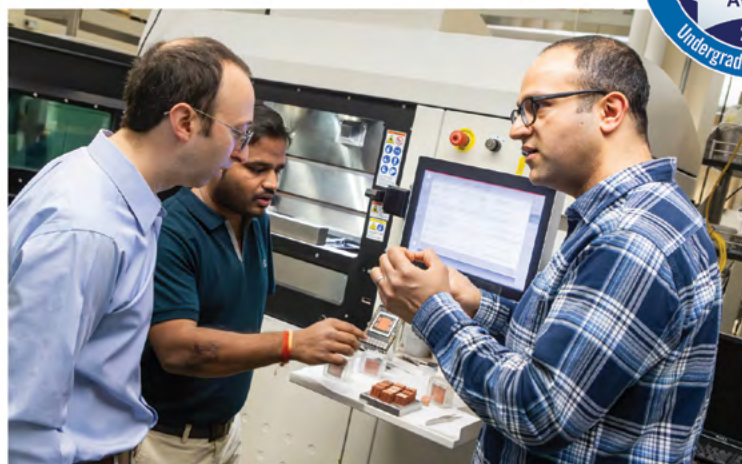
project targeting real institutional challenges—from closing equity gaps and improving student persistence to strengthening workforce pathways.

Collectively, participants are expected to produce up to 120 peer-reviewed research studies, creating what program organizers describe as a built-in engine for institutional improvement.

Southwestern College President and Superintendent Mark Sanchez, EdD, who was instrumental in spearheading the program, noted that it will serve as a strong workforce development strategy for the broader San Diego–Tijuana binational region.

"Today's project kickoff represents the culmination of a vision that began years ago—a vision for innovation in higher education and transformation in South San Diego County," he said. "This program is more than a degree opportunity, it is a pipeline to leadership."

Program organizers say the Southwestern pilot is intended as a replicable model—one that could eventually be scaled across California's community college system. The program's first cohort is expected to begin coursework in fall 2026. ●



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Campus Makerspaces Encourage Interdisciplinary Innovation

By Misty Evans

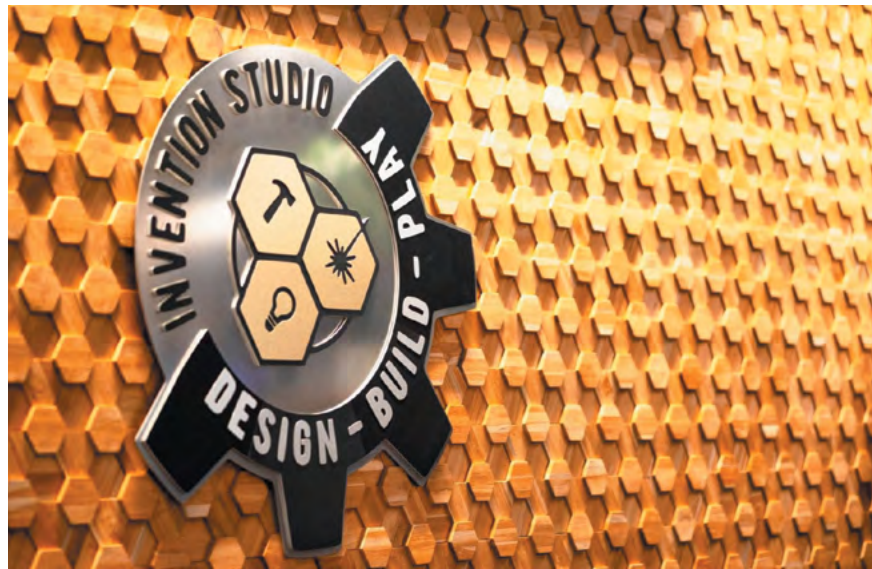
As universities seek new ways

to prepare students for rapidly evolving industries, many are investing in campus makerspaces—collaborative fabrication labs where students from engineering, design, business, and other fields can build prototypes and experiment with emerging technologies. These spaces allow them to move beyond theoretical coursework and engage directly in hands-on problem-solving, design, and innovation.

Makerspaces typically provide access to professional-grade equipment such as 3D printers, laser cutters, electronics workstations, and fabrication tools that enable students to design and construct prototypes. By combining technology with collaborative work environments, universities aim to encourage interdisciplinary learning and help students translate ideas into tangible projects.

Higher education leaders increasingly view these facilities as an important part of modern academic ecosystems. Makerspaces support project-based learning, allowing students to apply classroom knowledge in real-world contexts. Through experimentation, design iteration, and collaboration, students develop practical skills such as critical thinking, technical problem-solving, and teamwork—competencies that are increasingly valued by employers across industries.

One example is the Flowers Invention Studio at the Georgia Institute of Technology, a makerspace located within the university's engineering complex. The facility is open to students, faculty, and staff and provides access to a wide range of fabrication tools and technologies at no cost. According to Georgia Tech, the



The Flowers Invention Studio at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Invention Studio is designed to provide a collaborative environment where students can “design, build, and invent” while learning from peers and mentors.

The studio houses 3D printers, laser cutters, electronics workstations, welding equipment, and sewing machines, among other tools. They allow students to rapidly prototype designs, test engineering concepts, and refine projects through iterative experimentation. The space supports everything from class projects and research prototypes to entrepreneurial ventures developed by students.

A distinctive feature of the Georgia Tech makerspace is its student-led operational model. The studio is staffed primarily by trained student volunteers known as prototyping instructors who teach peers how to safely operate equipment and guide them through fabrication processes. This peer-to-

peer learning environment reinforces collaboration and gives students opportunities to build technical expertise while mentoring others.

Makerspaces also encourage interdisciplinary collaboration by bringing together people from different academic backgrounds. Projects often involve teams with diverse expertise—for example, engineering students working with industrial designers and business majors to develop product prototypes or entrepreneurial concepts. Such collaboration reflects the interdisciplinary nature of modern innovation, where technical development, design thinking, and market strategy often intersect.

According to SpringerLink, an online platform of tech, medical, and scientific documents, and MDPI Education Sciences, an open access journal on education, research on

educational makerspaces suggests these environments can strengthen creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Studies examining makerspaces in science and engineering education have found that students who participate in hands-on fabrication projects gain greater confidence in their technical abilities and develop stronger collaborative skills through team-based experimentation and design challenges.

In addition to supporting classroom learning, makerspaces can serve as incubators for ideas and entrepreneurship. Students who develop prototypes in campus fabrication labs sometimes continue refining those designs through university innovation programs, startup accelerators, or engineering competitions. Access to rapid prototyping tools allows them to test ideas quickly and improve designs before moving toward commercialization.

The rise of makerspaces also reflects

broader shifts in how universities approach workforce preparation. Many industries increasingly value graduates who can combine technical knowledge with creativity, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving. Makerspaces provide a setting where students can practice these skills.

Beyond engineering and technology, makerspaces are also being used by students in fields such as art, architecture, and digital media. Creative disciplines often rely on fabrication tools to produce installations, product designs, or multimedia projects. By locating makerspaces in central academic spaces such as libraries or innovation hubs, universities can encourage participation from across campus.

According to the Council on Library and Information Resources, library-based makerspaces in particular can expand interdisciplinary engagement by creating accessible environments where students and

faculty from multiple departments experiment with technology and creative design. These shared spaces help foster a campus culture of experimentation and collaboration.

As universities continue to expand makerspace programs, many are assessing how these facilities contribute to learning outcomes and campus innovation ecosystems. Scholars studying the maker movement in higher education, according to Science Direct, describe makerspaces as environments that encourage experimentation, collaboration, and applied learning while helping students connect academic concepts to practical solutions.

As innovation increasingly emerges at the intersection of disciplines, campus makerspaces are becoming important platforms for transforming ideas into tangible creations—and for preparing students to navigate complex technological and societal challenges. ●



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From Climate to Compensation:

Advancing Equity Through Systemwide Action at SIU



By Daniel Mahony, PhD, and Sheila Caldwell, EdD

In 2022, the Southern Illinois University System partnered with Viewfinder Campus Climate Surveys to conduct an inaugural systemwide campus climate survey for students and employees.

This was an important step in listening to the lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students across our campuses. What emerged from that effort was not just data, but direction.

The employee survey findings illuminated both strengths and gaps around perceptions of fairness, belonging, and compensation. Most importantly, the results became a catalyst for meaningful institutional change.

Among the most significant outcomes was uncovering salary disparities, prompting us to conduct a comprehensive salary equity study designed to ensure employees were compensated fairly, competitively, and in alignment with their roles, education, and contributions.

Viewfinder surveys' unique ability to go beyond just identifying issues—to revealing the underlying drivers behind them—gave us a clear view of the issues surrounding employee retention.

Rather than remaining a symbolic report, the climate study process drove us to take action, moving SIU from insight to implementation.

To ensure impartiality and credibility in this work, the SIU Carbondale (SIUC) campus partnered with CBIZ, a national compensation consulting firm known for helping higher education institutions design market-driven and equitable pay structures.

The CBIZ methodology is grounded in a commitment to external

competitiveness and internal equity. Their process allowed SIUC to align positions with relevant market benchmarks to understand how their salaries compare to peer organizations and make adjustments as necessary.

The central focus of the salary equalization study was aimed at addressing salary compression, which is a common challenge in higher education.

For example, in 2026 CUPA-HR finds long-term stagnation in faculty pay and structural gaps across employee groups. Salary compression occurs when salaries are compressed due to market shifts.

Over time, tenured faculty and long-term staff members' salaries may be equivalent to those of new hires. Salaries can also be compressed when team members are not fully compensated for their performance and/or scope of their work.

CBIZ was tasked with facilitating a detailed analysis of both market data and internal role relationships to help identify and correct salary compression and disparities.

The next step was to implement a standardized job questionnaire that empowered employees to provide detailed input on their actual job duties, scope of work, and impact.

This process laid the foundation for clearer salary bands, more transparent promotion pathways, and a compensation system that reflected both individual contributions and evolving market conditions.

At the heart of this effort was a commitment to transparency, structure, and equity. This year-long process ensured that positions were evaluated consistently and holistically, accounting not just for job titles but for the actual work being performed.



Southern Illinois University Carbondale in Carbondale, Illinois

It revealed that some employees were working in similar capacities but with lesser job titles and salaries. The questionnaire was designed to ensure integrity with position titles, work responsibilities, and output.

This process also allowed SIUC to develop clearer promotion pathways, provide employees with a more transparent understanding of how to grow within the university system, and have the opportunity to advance within their institution.

Too often, ambiguity around advancement and salary caps can lead to stagnation or inequity. By defining these pathways, SIUC created a system where effort, impact, and qualifications are now more clearly connected to opportunity.

The implementation of a new salary structure further reinforced this commitment. SIUC team members were given access to the CBIZ market analysis data, including minimum entry-level salaries and maximum salaries for each position, along with educational requirements and job duties.

This information reduced ambiguity and positioned the university to be more competitive for recruitment and retention efforts. The results of this work have been both measurable and meaningful.

Although gender and race were not considered in the analysis, it is meaningful that when the disaggregated data was examined, there were notable and significant salary increases across both.

These figures reflect a deliberate effort to address disparities while ensuring that adjustments reached employees across demographic groups, reinforcing the institution's commitment to equity in practice, not just in principle.

The SIUC System defines equity as “act right, make right, and do right.” The SIUC Salary Equalization study is a prime example of “make right and do right” by employees who were not being paid adequately for their contributions.

The study was a result of feedback from the 2022 Viewfinder Campus Climate Employee Survey. A common theme in the data collected was inequitable salaries and lack of

appreciation for employees' efforts.

We wanted SIUC team members across the system to know their voice matters. Changes were subsequently made to salary structures and job position descriptions to promote fair hiring practices and pay structures.

A significant percentage of both women and men received salary increases reflecting a broad effort to

strengthen and sustain equity and justice for staff, faculty, and students.

Before this process, many employees had not received a cost-of-living increase for several years. The opportunity cost of inaction exceeded \$3,000,000, which made it clear that intervention was necessary to retain a high-quality workforce.

The SIUC System's journey

Employee Increases By Race and Gender

Group	Women	Men
Hispanic/Latin Employees	52%	29%
Asian Employees	33%	19%
White Employees	27%	21%
Black Employees	16%	36%

address inequities across the system. These adjustments were not symbolic; they were felt and they were substantive.

For example, in one particularly powerful example, a female employee received a 41% salary increase. The impact of that adjustment was life-changing because it provided her with the financial stability to quit her part-time second job, providing more agency and choices about her career and future that were previously out of reach.

Lived experiences like this underscore what equity work is truly about. It is not just about reviewing and correcting numbers on a spreadsheet, but also restoring dignity, recognizing contributions, and ensuring that compensation reflects both the value of the work and the qualifications of the individual performing it.

The compensation study sent a clear message to the SIUC community. Equity is not a one-time exercise. Equity evolves as markets shift and roles change. For this reason, the SIUC System administered another systemwide Viewfinder Campus Climate Survey study in spring 2026

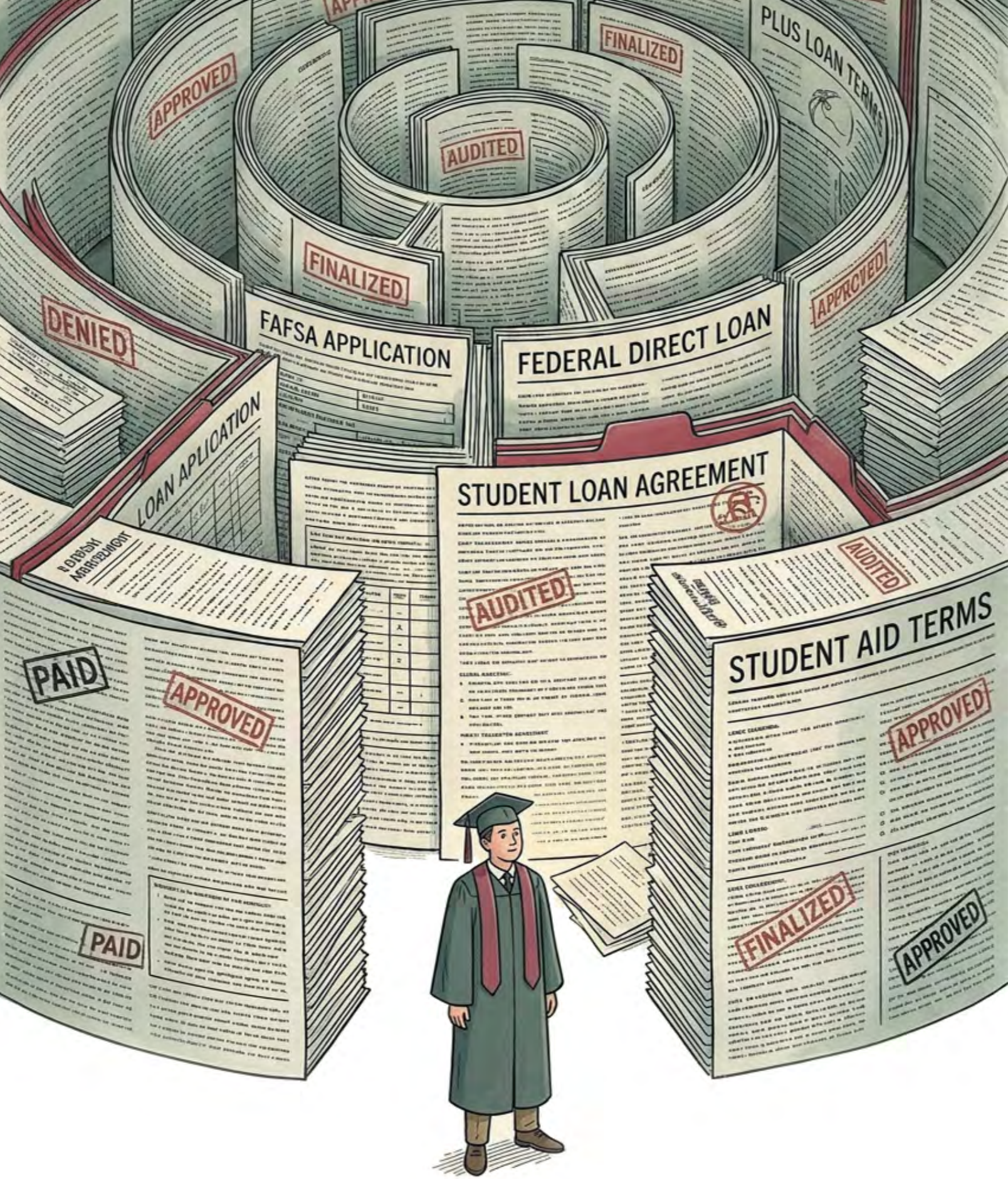
demonstrates what is possible when institutions ask the right questions, listen with intention, and act with resolve.

The 2022 Viewfinder employee survey did more than capture sentiment; it sparked a transformative process that aligned values with action. By investing in equitable compensation, SIUC is not only addressing past disparities but also building a more just and sustainable future for its campus community.

As higher education continues to navigate challenges related to workforce retention, morale, and trust, efforts like these offer an opportunity and path forward to listen well and respond to employees to ensure fairness is embedded in the institution. We must value and reward team members who are the backbone of our university. ●

Daniel Mahony, PhD, is the president of the Southern Illinois University System.

Sheila Caldwell, EdD, is the inaugural vice president for Anti-racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and chief diversity officer for the Southern Illinois University System. She is also a member of the Insight Into Academia Editorial Board.



The End of SAVE:

What Seven Million Borrowers Face Next

By Erik Cliburn

For more than a year and a half, millions of student loan borrowers have lived in financial limbo, enrolled in a repayment plan that promised lower bills, protected them from having to make payments, and waiting to see how a string of court battles would ultimately shake out. On March 10, 2026, the waiting ended and the answer was not the one they had hoped for.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit issued an order that effectively terminated the Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) plan, the Biden administration's flagship student loan initiative that had enrolled more than seven million borrowers since its 2023 launch.

The ruling reversed a lower court's February dismissal of a Republican-led lawsuit and directed a district judge to approve a settlement between Missouri—the lead plaintiff in one of two major legal challenges—and the Department of Education (ED). That judge signed off shortly after. With two sentences handed down from an appeals court, the most affordable federal loan repayment plan ever offered was gone.

What comes next is considerably less clear.

How It Unraveled

The SAVE plan was ambitious by design. The Biden administration billed it as a transformation of how working Americans repay federal student loans, calculating monthly payments based on income and family size rather than loan amount alone.

It capped payments for undergraduate borrowers at 5% of discretionary income, and eliminated interest accrual beyond what borrowers' monthly payments already covered. For a family of four earning \$81,000 a year, that would mean paying just \$36 a month.

Republican-led states moved quickly to challenge the ruling. Missouri and several allies argued the ED had overstepped its authority, and courts agreed and issued a series of injunctions that blocked key provisions and eventually placed all enrolled borrowers in forbearance.

Their loans stopped accruing progress toward forgiveness. Interest, however, began accumulating again in August 2025.

The Trump administration, far from defending the plan, negotiated a settlement to end it. Education Under Secretary Nicholas Kent, in a statement following the ruling, added that “in

the coming weeks, the Department will issue clear guidance on next steps for borrowers enrolled in the illegal SAVE Plan, including details regarding how borrowers can move into a legal repayment plan.”

That guidance has been slow to arrive.

The Transition Problem

The sheer scale of the transition is staggering. Moving millions of borrowers out of one repayment plan into another represents a logistical undertaking unlike anything the student loan system has recently attempted.

Loan servicers, already stretched by years of pandemic-era forbearance and policy whiplash, must now field an enormous wave of new applications. A Government Accountability Office report has warned that servicer oversight has been weakened. The ED's own online application systems have faced disruptions throughout the litigation period.

Meanwhile, a significant portion of those borrowers have not made a payment in more than 18 months. Some who took out loans during the COVID era have never made a payment at all. Advocates worry

that many will not recognize communications from their servicers, will not know where to log in to manage their accounts, and will be blindsided when bills arrive.

What Borrowers Can Expect

According to guidance from student loan advocacy groups, the ED plans to have servicers begin sending transition notices to SAVE borrowers on or around July 1, 2026.

transition out of SAVE before they at least open that new plan.”

RAP differs meaningfully from SAVE and other income-driven plans. It does not offer \$0 monthly payments regardless of income, and it extends the repayment timeline before debt forgiveness to 30 years, longer than any existing plan.

Critics note that low-income borrowers in particular could end up paying more over time under RAP than

The median American household of four and an \$81,000 income, which had paid \$36 monthly under SAVE, could see that amount climb to \$440 under RAP.

“The confusion certainly won’t stop until the department itself comes out and gives some sense of what is going to happen here,” Zampini says. “Up until now, it has all been speculation and guesswork.”

Elizabeth Robeson, a plaintiff in a separate lawsuit filed the day of the

“A significant portion of those borrowers have not made a payment in more than 18 months. Some who took out loans during the COVID era have never made a payment at all.”



From that point, they will have 90 days to enroll in a new plan. Those who do not act will be automatically placed in the Standard Repayment Plan, where monthly payments are based on loan balance rather than income, and are typically far higher.

The timing is not incidental. July 1 also marks the launch of the administration’s new income-driven option, the Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP). Michele Zampini, associate vice president of federal policy and advocacy at the Institute for College Access & Success (ICAS), suggested the administration has little incentive to push borrowers out of SAVE before its preferred successor is available.

“I think their goal is to do everything they can to get as many borrowers into RAP as possible,” she said. “I can’t imagine that they would want to tell borrowers they have to

under the plans it is designed to replace.

Borrowers who want to act before July 1 can apply now for Income-Based Repayment (IBR), Pay As You Earn, or Income-Contingent Repayment—the three remaining income-driven plans.

Higher education expert Mark Kantrowitz has pointed to IBR as the strongest alternative for most borrowers, particularly those who were already working toward Public Service Loan Forgiveness, and need to resume accumulating qualifying payments.

Higher Bills Ahead

For the majority of borrowers, the transition will mean higher monthly payments—often significantly higher.

An analysis from ICAS comparing SAVE and RAP payments for hypothetical borrowers across income levels found that monthly bills frequently jumped by more than \$100.

appeals court ruling, put the stakes in blunter terms. Robeson borrowed \$12,000 in the 1980s to attend the University of Mississippi, made more than 100 payments beyond what should have qualified her for forgiveness under SAVE, and today carries a balance of \$93,000. “I have never been out of compliance on this loan and have paid for decades,” she said in the suit. “The student loan crisis has cruelly forced millions of working Americans like me to live in a labyrinth with no clear exit despite our having followed the law.”

For the seven million borrowers navigating that same maze, the summer of 2026 will be a defining moment—one whose consequences depend heavily on whether the guidance, the technology, and the capacity are there to meet them. ●



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Innovation By Design

By Erik Cliburn



Higher education

has always been a place where ideas take shape and possibilities expand. But in today's landscape marked by technological disruption, shifting student needs, and growing pressure to demonstrate relevance and return, innovation is no longer optional. It is the defining characteristic of institutions built to last.

We are proud to present the recipients of the 2026 Insight Into Academia Top Colleges for Innovation Award. The award recognizes colleges and universities where innovation is not just a stand-alone initiative or marketing talking point, but a driving force woven into the very fabric of how they lead, teach, and operate.

These award-winning institutions don't simply respond to change—they create it. They question legacy systems, reimagine how education is structured and delivered, and build cultures where creativity, collaboration, and continuous improvement are expected at every level.

Honorees represent a wide range of institution types, sizes, and missions, from community colleges serving working families in rural areas, to R1 research universities deploying AI supercomputers, to flagship public institutions rethinking the first-year experience from the ground up.

What unites them is not a single model or methodology, but a shared conviction that meaningful transformation is possible—and necessary—and that it demands sustained, intentional commitment across an entire organization.

These colleges and universities are revolutionizing areas ranging from AI-powered procurement and mental health support to workforce pipelines that reshape regional economies. They are also redesigning organizational structures to survive and thrive while putting cutting-edge tools in the hands of students. The breadth is remarkable. So is the depth.

Selected for their ability to embed innovation across academic design, student experience, research infrastructure, faculty engagement, and administrative systems, this year's honorees serve as national exemplars for what becomes possible when bold ideas meet institutional alignment. Through their stories, readers will find practical inspiration and replicable approaches that can take root on campuses everywhere. ●

2026 Insight Into Academia Top Colleges for Innovation Award Recipients

Alamo Colleges District
Arkansas State University
Augustana College
Coastal Bend College
Cuyahoga Community College
Hudson County Community College
Lawrence Technological University
Mississippi State University
Mount Mary University
Northern Illinois University
Pikes Peak State College
San José State University
Unity Environmental University
Universidad del Sagrado Corazón
The University at Albany, State University of New York
University of Lynchburg
University of Maryland, College Park
University of Minnesota Rochester
University of South Carolina Beaufort



Intelligence Applied

Four Institutions Are Putting AI to Work

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant horizon for higher education—it is reshaping classrooms, research labs, career centers, and administrative offices now. Among the 2026 Insight Into Academia Top Colleges for Innovation Award winners, four winners stand out for the depth and intentionality of their AI investments. Together, they represent a broad spectrum of approaches—from AI ethics research to lecture-to-podcast conversion.

Situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, **San José State University (SJSU)** has built an AI ecosystem that leverages its unique geographic position. The university's AI Faculty Fellows Program embeds AI expertise directly into academic departments, while the Advanced Institute for Ethical Technologies serves as a research home for examining the societal implications of emerging tools.

Perhaps most striking is the AI Center for Civic and Social Good, a strategic collaboration with the City of San José, industry leaders, and public-sector partners to advance AI research with genuine community impact.

On the student-facing side, SJSU's approach to digital fluency has reached impressive scale.

In fall 2025, the university's Jumpstarting Digital Literacy initiative engaged nearly 3,000 students across 126 course sections and 50 faculty members—its largest-ever activation in the Adobe for All program.

Career preparation is woven into these efforts as well. The Career Center's Adobe Digital Experience Career Accelerator Series supports industry-recognized skill development and portfolio creation, connecting classroom learning directly



San José State University students and faculty collaborate on a wearable robotic exoskeleton in a campus hallway, putting Silicon Valley's spirit of hands-on innovation to work in the classroom. (Photo credit: Jennie Gonzalez, 2025)

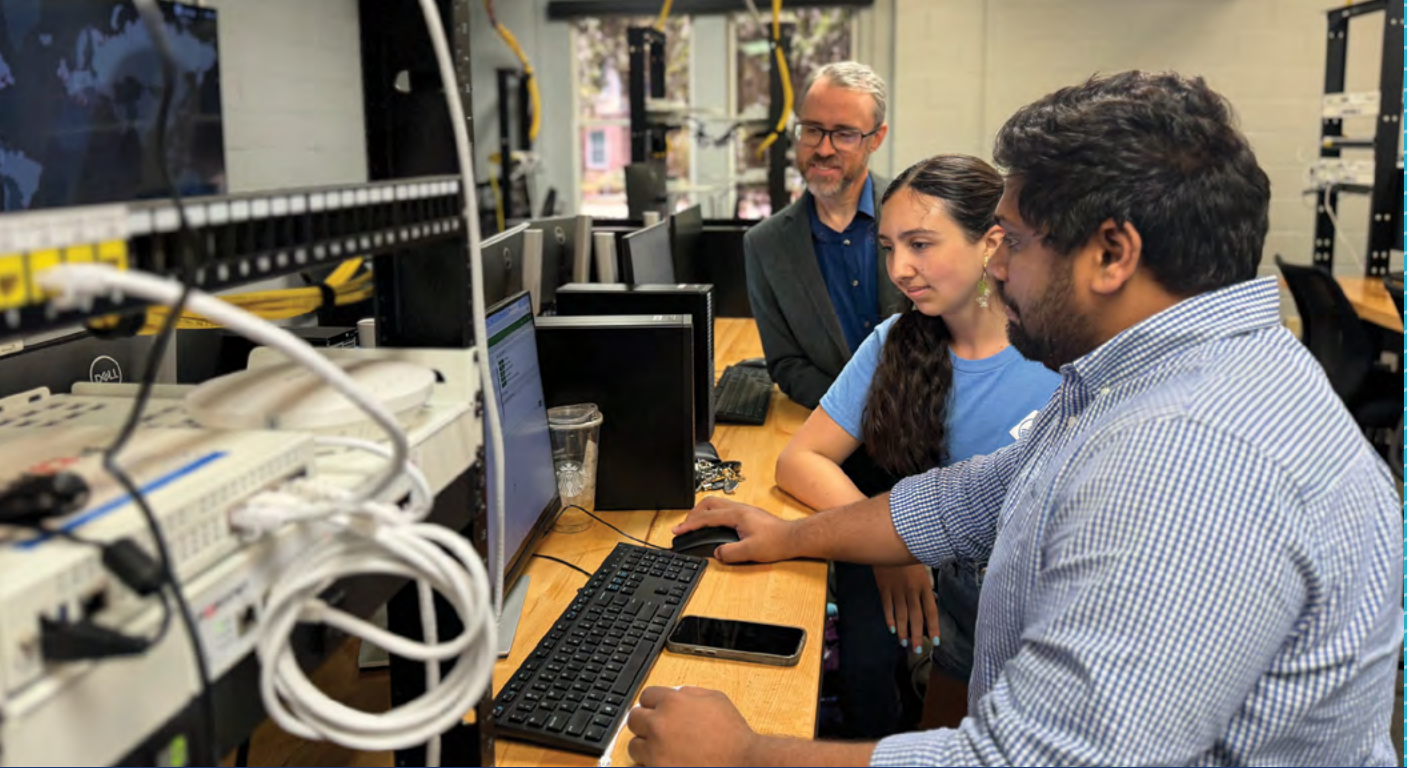


Under its AI Plus initiative, UAlbany is expanding access to foundational AI coursework and research to students in every major—from biotechnology and cybersecurity to philosophy, atmospheric sciences, and the humanities. The program reflects an institution-wide conviction that every student, regardless of interest or field, must be prepared to live and work in a world transformed by technology. (Photo by Brian Busher/UAlbany)

to workforce readiness in a region where employers expect digital fluency from day one. SJSU has also integrated peer wellness ambassadors into its student support fabric, recognizing that thriving in a high-pressure, technology-saturated environment requires holistic attention to well-being. The result is an institution where AI innovation and human-centered support operate in complete alignment.

Where SJSU has built a deep and highly integrated AI ecosystem, the **University at Albany, SUNY (UAlbany)** has pursued a sweeping institution-wide transformation—one built on the premise that every student, regardless of major, should graduate prepared to live and work alongside AI.

The scale of UAlbany's commitment is visible in concrete investments. The university became the first in the world to host an IBM Artificial Intelligence Unit computing cluster, and in fall 2024 unveiled a state-of-the-art supercomputer powered by 24 NVIDIA DGX systems—one of the most capable university-based AI clusters in the United States.



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Mississippi State University students work hands-on in one of the university's advanced research and engineering facilities, applying classroom learning to real-world challenges as part of MSU's commitment to experiential, innovation-driven education.



The WellNest reflects Lynchburg's commitment to holistic student success, offering an environment designed to prioritize mental health, spiritual wellness, and peer-to-peer support—an innovative complement to the university's academic programming.

This \$37 million campus investment, backed by partnerships with IBM and NVIDIA, makes capabilities typically found only in private industry available in a public university setting.

The AI+ Initiative is organized around four interconnected centers. The AI & Society Research Center brings together faculty from arts, humanities, social sciences, and technical fields to explore how AI reshapes public life. The AI & Society College, founded in 2025 with a \$2.4 million SUNY investment, integrates AI education across all nine schools and colleges. The Center for Emerging Artificial Intelligence Systems (CEAIS), a collaboration with IBM, powers new research with advanced cloud computing. And the Global Center for AI in Mental Health is developing tools including an AI Therapy Assistant and an AI Psychological First Aid tool to support clinicians and first responders.

Beginning in fall 2026, UAlbany plans to embed AI competencies directly into core curriculum requirements, ensuring every graduate demonstrates baseline AI literacy regardless of field.

At **Mississippi State University (MSU)**, AI strategy begins with governance. The university has appointed a Senior Advisor for Artificial Intelligence and Data Governance to guide university-wide strategy and implementation, a signal that MSU treats AI as both a meaningful teaching tool and a major institutional priority.

Rather than leaving adoption to individual faculty members, MSU has built a structural framework. Each college and division has identified AI Ambassadors who create discipline-specific collaborations and opportunities for AI-focused teaching and learning. The university also supports a campus-wide AI Community Teams Group—an opt-in network giving faculty and staff a shared space to exchange resources and access learning opportunities through an AI Innovation Hub.

On the operational side, MSU has modernized purchasing through the Bully Buy procurement system, specifically its Contracts+ module, which automates contract drafting,

routing, and approvals across the university using cloud-based and AI-driven tools.

MSU Libraries also sponsors an annual hackathon, giving students hands-on experience tackling real-world challenges with emerging technologies.

While some institutions are building AI infrastructure at scale, others are finding that the most meaningful innovations are the ones that meet students where they are in their daily lives. At the **University of Lynchburg** in Virginia, one of the most distinctive initiatives is deceptively simple: AI-generated audio overviews that convert lecture content into podcast-style summaries that students can listen to on their phones while commuting, exercising, or in between classes.

For busy students—particularly first-generation learners balancing work, family, and coursework—this kind of flexible access to course material can make a real difference in comprehension and retention.

The university has formalized this spirit of innovation through its Teaching and Learning Center for AI Excellence, which supports faculty in developing pedagogically sound AI integrations. ThoughtLab, another distinctive initiative, serves as a long-term content marketing and thought leadership platform that translates complex faculty research and professional expertise into accessible, public-facing ideas—making the institution's intellectual work visible and relevant to broader audiences.

The Student-Athlete Advisory Committee further reflects the university's attention to niche student populations, ensuring that even specialized groups feel meaningfully integrated into campus culture.

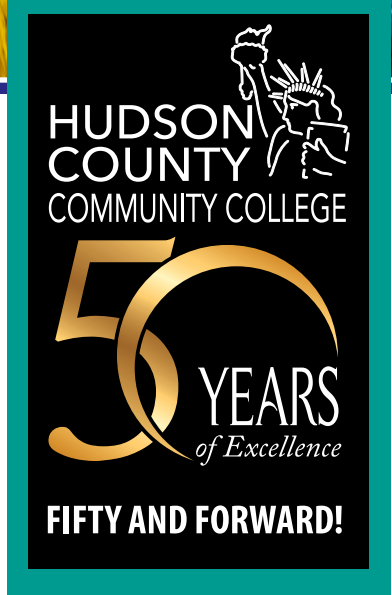
What unites these four award-winning institutions is not a single playbook but a shared conviction: that AI in higher education must be approached with intentionality, ethical grounding, and a commitment to equity. Whether through large-scale infrastructure investments or a well-designed podcast feed, the goal is the same—preparing students and employees to thrive in a world that AI is already reshaping. ●

Hudson County Community College

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that drive student success.



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Meeting Students Where They Are

Innovative Models for Access, Support, and Success

Some of the most compelling innovation in higher education today isn't in research labs or technology accelerators; it's in the decisions institutions make about who gets to walk through the door, and what support awaits them once they arrive.

Five of this year's Top Colleges for Innovation Award winners have developed programs that fundamentally reimagine college access and student success, drawing on everything from philanthropic partnerships to intergenerational housing to first-year research experiences.

Hudson County Community College (HCCC) in Jersey City, New Jersey serves one of the most economically and demographically diverse student populations in the country—and its forward-thinking reflects the complexity of that mission. The college's Hudson Scholars Program, a Bellwether Award finalist and nationally recognized model for community college student success, combines proactive advisement, financial stipends, and early academic intervention with wraparound services addressing food insecurity, housing instability, mental health, emergency funding, and immigration assistance.



Students in MMU's health sciences programs use an Anatomage table for 3D virtual dissection, exploring the human body through cutting-edge technology. The tool exemplifies MMU's mission of empowering tech-fluent health care leaders and pioneering new pathways from the classroom to the clinic.



The Phi Theta Kappa chapter at Hudson County Community College, Beta Alpha Phi, has earned recognition through numerous regional and national awards for its impactful service projects and commitment to uplifting the broader community.

The results speak for themselves: two-year college completion rates have increased fivefold for traditionally underrepresented students, and fall-to-fall retention rates have improved by 37% for all Hudson Scholars participants.

The program has supported a 70% reduction in historic equity and achievement gaps—and is financially self-sustaining, generating net revenue through the enrollment and retention improvements it produces. Now serving more than 5,000 students, Hudson Scholars is on track to scale to the entire HCCC student body within five years.

HCCC's commitment to economic mobility extends beyond the classroom as well. The Gateway to Innovation (GTI) program, a Bellwether Award finalist and Innovation of the Year Award recipient from the League for Innovation in the Community College, addresses economic mobility for service industry workers by connecting them with recession-resistant career pathways.

Through a Bank of America grant, GTI built the Experiential Learning Opportunities Program, offering job shadowing, mentoring, and internships alongside wraparound services including transportation and childcare support. Thousands of students have earned industry-recognized credentials in finance, health care, IT, and logistics as a result.

Across the country in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, **Mount Mary University (MMU)** has taken a uniquely holistic approach to student success—one that includes where students live.

In 2022, MMU partnered with the School Sisters of Notre Dame and Milwaukee Catholic Home to open Trinity Woods, a \$45 million intergenerational living complex on the north side of campus. The complex includes 52 residences for the Sisters of Notre Dame, 24 dormitory units for single mothers enrolled as MMU students and their children under age 12, and 90 independent living apartments for individuals over age 62.

It is a national blueprint for addressing the housing and childcare barriers that prevent student-parents from completing their degrees. MMU has also developed the CulturaBot, a generative AI application created by occupational therapy faculty and students to train health care workers in providing culturally sensitive care.

Using scientifically reliable resources, the app answers clinicians' questions about delivering care that accounts for patients' cultural backgrounds, an innovation with implications that extend well beyond the campus.

Meanwhile, the Thrive in 3 program—the first of its kind in Wisconsin—strategically redesigns degree pathways to 95 credits without sacrificing academic rigor, enabling students in fields like Cybersecurity, Digital Marketing, and Social Work to graduate a full year earlier and save significantly on tuition.

At **Augustana College** in Rock Island, Illinois, innovation takes the form of a structured institutional practice: a formal submission process through which faculty and staff propose new initiatives aligned with the college's strategic plan. Ideas are evaluated for fit, cost, and expected results, sponsored by a cabinet member, and advanced through the Strategic Plan Implementation Council.



Students and faculty use ArcGIS to collect tree data as part of a West End Revitalization Project in Rock Island, Illinois, where their findings directly inform community planning decisions—a hands-on example of Augustana's commitment to engaged, place-based learning.

Progress is reported to the Innovation and Competitive Position Committee of the Board of Trustees, ensuring that innovation is tracked at the highest level of attention and governance.

One of the most transformative outcomes of this approach has been the Gerber Grand Challenge, a philanthropic initiative that engages students and faculty in addressing complex regional problems through interdisciplinary problem-solving.

Paired with a \$40 million donor match program that has significantly expanded access to financial aid, Augustana is demonstrating how smart institutional design and philanthropic ambition can combine to make a private liberal arts education genuinely accessible. The college also deploys a behavioral intervention team—a proactive, coordinated effort to identify and support students who may be struggling before a crisis occurs.

For institutions serving rural communities and working families, the barriers to access often require solutions as specific as the populations they serve.



Leaders from Coastal Bend College and Goodwill Industries of South Texas gather to celebrate their innovative co-enrollment partnership, which reduces barriers for adult learners and connects working families in rural South Texas with expanded educational and career opportunities.

Coastal Bend College in rural southern Texas has built workforce models that redesign how education, training, and employment connect for exactly these students. Its partnership with Goodwill Industries of South Texas allows students to co-enroll across institutions, reducing barriers for adult learners.

The college's Cougar to Jaguar articulation model smooths transfer pathways to four-year institutions, and its innovative credential model—translating employer-based training for Texas Department of Criminal Justice

correctional officers into recognized postsecondary credentials—gives working adults a pathway to college credit they would not otherwise have.

At the other end of the institutional spectrum, the flagship **University of Maryland, College Park** demonstrates that access innovation is equally vital at large research universities.

FIRE, the First-Year Innovation & Research Experience, provides more than 600 incoming students each year with faculty-mentored research across 16 different streams, accelerating career readiness through authentic, open-ended scientific inquiry. FIRE gives first-year undergraduates research credentials and experiences typically reserved for upper-division classes or graduate study.

Complementing this is the SHIFT facilities portal—a 24/7 campus service hub that routes work orders more efficiently across five major operational units, improving transparency and response times for the entire campus community—reflecting UMD’s broader commitment to operational innovation in service of its people. ●



Ranked seventh overall in the 2026 Top Colleges for Entrepreneurship by Entrepreneur Magazine and Princeton Review, University of Maryland, College Park has appeared in the Top 10 for 11 consecutive years—a testament to the university’s sustained commitment to innovation, research, and student entrepreneurship.

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Innovations Redefining Career Preparation

As employers grow more vocal about the gap between what graduates know and what they need to know, these colleges and universities are responding with some of the most practical and inventive programming in their histories.

Four of this year's innovation award winners have developed standout approaches to connecting education and employment—programs that range from a nationally recognized hardware accelerator to voter-driven policy change to an innovative dual-enrollment faculty placement model.

Lawrence Technological University (LTU) in Southfield, Michigan has built one of the most industry-integrated educational environments in the country. At the center of that ecosystem is the Centropolis Accelerator, a nationally recognized manufacturing and hardware accelerator that supports product development, advanced manufacturing, and mobility innovation.

Through Centropolis, LTU works with startups, manufacturers, and industry partners to bring new technologies to market. Students participate alongside them, gaining direct experience in prototyping, applied research, and technology commercialization.

The accelerator has supported hundreds of companies and helped secure millions of dollars in funding for next-generation solutions in sustainable manufacturing and autonomous mobility. LTU's Industry Immersion model extends this principle across academic programs, placing students directly with companies through internships, applied research projects, and sponsored design challenges.

The model creates a living feedback loop between academe and the workforce, ensuring that what students learn remains continuously calibrated to what industries actually need. Supporting this is the university's Student Success and Scholarship Program (SSSP), which ensures that industry-integrated learning is accessible across economic backgrounds.

Perhaps the most visible expression of LTU's innovation culture is Robofest, an international robotics competition founded by Dr. C.J. Chung that attracts thousands of K-12 youth and educators from around the world each year.

LTU students serve as mentors, technical assistants, and event organizers, developing leadership and technical skills while inspiring the next generation of engineers. LTU's membership in the Kern Entrepreneurial Engineering



LTU student team members discuss the design and engineering decisions behind a custom-built, off-road vehicle constructed from the ground up—example of the university's Industry Immersion model, which places students in real-world problem-solving experiences from day one.

Network, which received a Gold Edison Award for innovation in engineering education, further reflects the university's national standing as a model for industry-aligned learning.

Innovation in workforce preparation doesn't always require a high-tech accelerator. Sometimes it involves rethinking where education happens in the first place.

The **Alamo Colleges District (ACD)** in San Antonio, Texas has developed an Embedded Faculty Model that targets one of the most persistent barriers to college access: the shortage of qualified dual-credit instructors in underserved high schools.

Working in partnership with Northeast Independent School District, the model places full-time college faculty in high schools that lack qualified instructors—one each in English, history, and government—enabling students to complete at least 15 dual-credit hours before graduation.

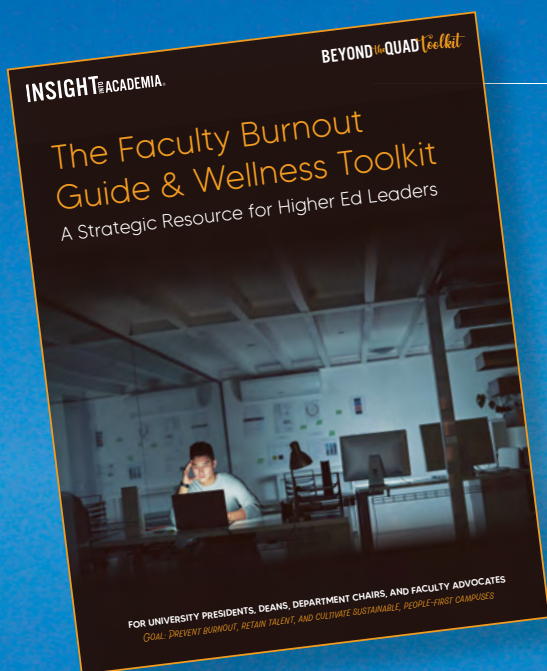
The financial logic is as innovative as the pedagogical model itself. The estimated two-year implementation cost is just over \$360,000, while the projected return, driven by Texas House Bill 8 funding incentives of \$3,500 per student completing 15 credit hours, could exceed \$1.7 million, with a total potential return approaching \$2.4 million.

The model is designed to scale across eight high schools in future phases. ACD has also advanced competency mapping as a cornerstone of its employee development planning, using

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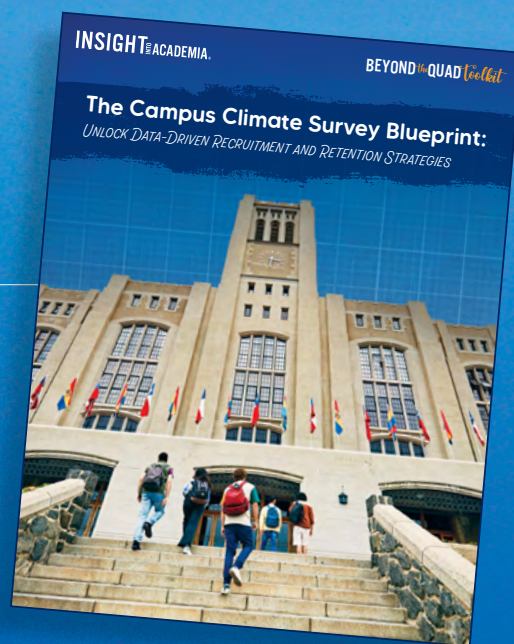
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Advocacy Centers at each of Alamo Colleges District's five colleges provide students with essential resources as part of a district-wide commitment to student well-being and success, ensuring that support is accessible across every campus in the system.



From simulation to real-world care: Pikes Peak State College students sharpen clinical skills at cutting-edge facilities including the Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation Oral Health Career Center and the Center for Healthcare Education and Simulation, preparing for careers in one of the region's fastest-growing workforce sectors.



A researcher works with cryogenic storage equipment at Arkansas State University, where the Arkansas Biosciences Institute and a growing portfolio of research partnerships are driving scientific discovery and economic development across the state and greater Delta region.

a Korn Ferry framework to engage more than 80 employees and supervisors in identifying essential competencies across six key job roles to build a more intentional foundation for professional growth across the institution.

Arkansas State University (A-State) has built a culture of connection—between faculty and staff across departments, between students and entrepreneurs, and between the

campus and the communities it serves.

A-State Innovate, the university's entrepreneurial ecosystem led by the Delta Center for Economic Development, supports startups and entrepreneurs throughout the state and greater Delta region, offering help with patents, prototyping, finance, design, and marketing. It is a model for how a land grant institution can serve as a genuine economic engine for a historically underinvested region.

Inside the university, the Empower the Pack: Mentorship program builds meaningful relationships across campus by intentionally pairing colleagues across departments and roles. Now in its second year, the program uses a flexible structure—monthly meetings that can occur virtually, by phone, or in person—to reduce participation barriers while maintaining accountability. Mentees report increased confidence and progress toward professional goals; mentors describe the experience as affirming and fulfilling.

Making Connections courses serve as a curricular innovation that intentionally weaves student wellness programming, academic success strategies, and relationship building into the academic experience.

The A-State Aggie Market and One-Pack donor system reflect the university's investment in sustainable funding and community engagement models. And A-State's

opening of Windgate Hall of Art and Innovation, housing both the Department of Art + Design and the College of Engineering and Computer Science, signals a commitment to interdisciplinary, creative learning that mirrors the demands of a rapidly evolving workforce.

Sometimes the most consequential innovation happens not on a campus but in a statehouse. **Pikes Peak State College (PPSC)** in Colorado Springs has demonstrated that colleges willing to engage in policy advocacy can reshape the landscape for students far beyond their own enrollment.

PPSC's president played a pivotal advocacy role in securing state legislation allowing school districts to use voter-approved mill levies to support innovative educational partnerships with higher education institutions, a policy victory that now creates sustainable funding pathways benefiting students across Colorado.

This is institutional innovation operating at the level of public policy, and it is a model that other community colleges are watching closely.

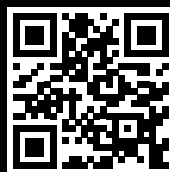
Internally, PPSC launched a Center for Employee Engagement, championed AI-enabled student support systems, and transitioned to a coaching-based performance model that emphasizes growth and continuous improvement.

Under the president's leadership, the college has become synonymous with innovation within the Colorado Community College System, recognized not only for what it accomplishes but for how it approaches challenges: with creativity, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to removing barriers for every student it serves. ●



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New Blueprints

Rethinking How Colleges or Universities are Built

A recurring theme in higher education today is institutional sustainability—the challenge of building models that can survive enrollment volatility, demographic shifts, and rapid technological change.

Three of this year's innovation award winners have approached this not just operationally but structurally, rethinking the architecture of how a college or university is organized, governed, and resourced. Their stories offer some of the most thought-provoking examples of what genuine institutional reinvention looks like.

When Dr. Melik Peter Khoury became **Unity Environmental University's** 11th president in 2016, the institution in New Gloucester, Maine was facing an existential crisis familiar to many small, private, tuition-dependent schools: shrinking enrollment, leadership turnover, and deep resistance to change.

What followed was a radical reinvention. Rather than tinkering at the margins, Dr. Khoury restructured the entire institution around an Enterprise Model comprising semi-independent, audience-focused subsidiaries and Sustainable Education Business Units (SEBUs), supported by centralized shared services.

The results have been remarkable. What began as a

survival strategy for an institution averaging 550 students has scaled to serve more than 10,000 students nationwide. Unity holds a tuition freeze through 2030, ranks in the top 1% of universities on the 2025 Social Mobility Index, and is seventh on the Forbes Advisor Best Online Environmental Science Degree Options list as the Best Accelerated Option. Its Sustainable Ventures SEBU provides retail goods and services as real-world manifestations of its curriculum, building revenue streams that reduce dependence on tuition and philanthropy.

Unity's most recent curricular innovation is its 90-credit Applied Bachelor of Science degree—Maine's first accreditor-approved credential of its kind, validated by NECHE and designed directly in response to employer demand for environmental professionals. By eliminating redundant credit requirements without sacrificing rigor, the degree saves students more than a year of study and over \$14,000 in tuition.

The institution has also deployed Adaptive Learning, Insight & Navigation (ALIGN), a proprietary AI platform developed entirely in-house, embedding Una Guide—a Socratic AI learning assistant—directly in its LMS to scaffold student thinking rather than simply provide answers.



Unity Environmental University students take their coursework into the field, conducting environmental research in Maine's natural landscape — a reflection of the university's applied, sustainability-focused curriculum and its belief that meaningful learning happens well beyond the classroom walls.



Universidad del Sagrado Corazón students conduct scientific research, reflecting the university's RBK framework—an institution-wide commitment to experiential learning, innovation, and ethical reasoning built in the wake of Hurricane María's transformative challenge to the institution's mission.

Institutional reinvention can also be born from a crisis. Hurricane María in 2017 was catastrophic for Puerto Rico, and transformative for the **Universidad del Sagrado Corazón (Sagrado)** in San Juan.

Rather than simply recovering, Sagrado used the natural disaster as a catalyst for a wholesale reimagining of its mission and educational model. The result is the RBK framework named after the Rebecca, the ship that brought the Society of the Sacred Heart's sisters to the Americas in 1818 symbolizing innovation, courage, and purposeful action.

At the academic core, undergraduate education has been redesigned around five durable competencies: critical thinking, multimodal communication, research and exploration, innovation and entrepreneurship, and ethical reasoning grounded in social justice. These are embedded in a 39-credit general education core delivered through multidisciplinary, experiential learning.

The Pedagogical Innovation Unit (PIU), led by a senior manager who directs a specialized team and a dedicated operating budget, advances faculty-centered innovation, instructional redesign, and evidence-based teaching practices institution-wide.

Sagrado has also developed comprehensive human development consulting through the Neeuko Collaborative Innovation Center, extending the university's expertise directly into the communities it serves. Its data-driven decision systems integrate institutional research, learning assessment, and analytics into cabinet-level planning, enabling leaders to monitor outcomes and redirect resources in real time. For Sagrado, innovation is not a strategy adopted after the storm passed, it is the ongoing process of building something more equitable in its wake.



Guided by dedicated faculty, University of Minnesota Rochester students engage in hands-on environments designed to spark creativity and explore emerging technologies—part of UMR's evidence-based approach to learning in which high-impact practices are embedded directly into the curriculum.

What if an institution could be built from the ground up, unconstrained by legacy systems and inherited structures? That is precisely the opportunity that the **University of Minnesota Rochester (UMR)** was given when it welcomed its first class of students in 2009, one of only a handful of four-year public universities created in the United States this century.

Another innovative structure involves the unique two-house structure of UMR's faculty: Tenured/Tenure-Track, and Student Based Faculty (SBFs), which allows them to minimize the hiring of adjuncts. SBFs have a clear promotional structure that enables them access to higher pay levels and increasing levels of opportunity and leadership. In order for any official policy to pass through the faculty body, it must be approved by both UMR faculty houses—the SBFs and the faculty. Due to these practices, most SBFs have been with UMR for more than 10 years, and many almost from the start of the University.

The institution operates as a single, interdisciplinary department called the Center for Learning Innovation (CLI). All faculty are hired, tenured, and promoted based primarily on their engagement with evidence-based teaching practices.

High-impact practices—community-engaged learning, first-year seminars, capstone experiences, undergraduate research, and internships—are written directly into the curriculum so they are accessible to every student, not just those who seek them out.

UMR's Chief Academic Officer holds the title Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs and Innovation, a signal that innovation is a core institutional responsibility. The university partners with more than two dozen community organizations, including the Mayo Clinic and the Hormel Institute, creating internship and community engagement opportunities that give students meaningful access to careers in health sciences.

At UMR, the structure is the innovation, and it offers a model that more established institutions can learn from. ●

Rooted in Place

Institutions Redefining Their Role in the Community

Higher education's promise has always been largely about the relationship between a campus and the community that surrounds it.

For three of the 2026 Top Colleges for Innovation Award winners, that relationship is central not just to their values but to their most innovative programs. **Northern Illinois University (NIU)**, **Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C)**, and the **University of South Carolina Beaufort (USCB)** have each found distinctive ways to extend their campuses outward, serving not just traditional students but lifelong learners, workforce seekers, and community members who may never formally enroll.

NIU in DeKalb, Illinois has framed workforce development and community engagement as inseparable from its academic mission. Newton—the Northern Energy Workforce + Technology Network—brings industry partners in as investors in research and workforce development initiatives focused on energy and climate.

Faculty and students design research projects and training programs around challenges that industry identifies, creating a shared stake in outcomes that goes well beyond the typical transactional relationship between universities and employers.

NIU's Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL) serves as an internal engine for curricular innovation, offering workshops, grants, toolkits, and professional learning communities to faculty.

The university's initiative focused on Student Success in



President Michael A. Baston, JD, EdD (center) joins students, faculty, and staff at Cuyahoga Community College's Voter Experience event, reflecting Tri-C's commitment to civic engagement and its role as an active partner in the Greater Cleveland community.

Gateway Courses used course-level data disaggregated by student demographics to implement targeted instructional innovations in high-enrollment foundational courses, with a specific focus on persistence and equity for underrepresented students.

NIU's Innovation Fund provides strategic funding for emerging ideas that advance student success, research, and community impact—enabling faculty, staff, and university partners to pilot high-impact initiatives and scale promising solutions.

A standout community-facing effort is the Safe Selling Initiative, a program designed to equip local small business owners and entrepreneurs with skills for safer, more effective sales practices, extending the university's expertise directly into regional economic development.

The Candidate Concierge program, meanwhile, demonstrates NIU's sophisticated understanding of what it takes to attract talented faculty and staff: personalized community introductions, housing assistance, and family integration support signal that NIU invests in the whole person it is recruiting, not just their professional credentials.

Community engagement as deep and sustained as NIU's is one hallmark of innovative institutions, and Tri-C in Cleveland, Ohio has made it the cornerstone of its identity. Under



NIU's College of Engineering and Engineering Technology Innovation Showcase highlights student and faculty research in materials, manufacturing, automation, and data analytics—spotlighting the transformative work and emerging technologies driving the next decade of engineering innovation at the university.

President Michael A. Baston, JD, EdD, a nationally recognized voice in community college reform, Tri-C has positioned itself as a civic and economic institution as much as an educational one.

Their partnership in the MidTown Collaboration Center (MCC), a 95,000-square-foot innovation hub in Cleveland's MidTown neighborhood, places the college alongside Case Western Reserve University, University Hospitals, the Cleveland Institute of Art, and major economic development organizations, embedding the college within the region's broader innovation infrastructure.

Tri-C's Workforce Innovation division works directly with area employers to upskill and reskill workers across information technology, health care, advanced manufacturing, construction, transportation, and public safety sectors, keeping Northeast Ohio's workforce competitive.

As a founding member of the League for Innovation in the Community College, an international nonprofit dedicated to transforming the community college experience, Tri-C's leadership role in shaping the field nationally is as significant as its local impact. The college's 85% graduate retention rate within the region underscores just how deeply it is woven into the economic fabric of greater Cleveland.

Regional context shapes innovation in different ways for different institutions. The University of South Carolina Beaufort (USCB) sits in the Lowcountry, a region shaped by its unique cultural heritage, stunning natural environment, and rapidly changing economic landscape, including the arrival of major international employers like Hyundai's Metaplant, located just 37 miles from campus.

USCB has responded to these shifts with a curriculum and community engagement strategy that honors both the distinctiveness of the region and the demands of the global economy. Among USCB's most distinctive innovations is its Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), which provides lifelong learning opportunities to Lowcountry residents, primarily retirees who have settled in the area seeking intellectual engagement and community connection.

OLLI courses are taught by volunteer



Many college students go to social media or AI instead of traditional counseling services. Augustana's **Peer Recovery Support** expands access to mental health care via the people who understand what students are going through – their peers.

Each peer supporter completes certified recovery support specialist training and manages a small caseload, gaining experience toward a career in the growing mental health workforce.

Peer Recovery Support reflects Augustana's innovative approach to developing student potential. Here, personal connection supports personal responsibility, preparing students for a better future.

Augustana College

Rock Island, Illinois



USCB's Global Reach initiative fosters international competencies through partnerships with accredited institutions abroad, study abroad programs, language immersion, and cultural programming on campus. A winner of the AASCU Excellence & Innovation Award for International Education, USCB has offered students recent experiences in Poland, France, the Netherlands, the Bahamas, Costa Rica, and South Korea.

instructors, which means that membership fees are reinvested directly into the program and the university.

Beyond its educational value, OLLI serves as a community bridge: the satisfaction of OLLI members translates into goodwill toward the institution among families of prospective students, strengthening USCB's ties across generations.

The OLLI Makerspace, open to students, faculty, staff, and OLLI members alike, provides shared access to VR technology and fabrication tools that bring different campus communities together around creative and technical exploration.

USCB has also developed an Asian studies initiative that reflects its attention to regional economic transformation. As Korean and Japanese businesses have established significant presences in the Lowcountry, the university has developed programming, including a partnership with EWHA Language Center and the Japan Foundation, to equip both campus and community members with the cultural and language context needed to thrive in this evolving environment.

A major classroom redesign initiative is transforming eight instructional spaces into flexible, collaborative environments designed around active learning, and the university's strategic goal of ensuring every student has at least one experiential learning opportunity before graduation, currently at 70% and growing, reflects the same commitment to practical, engaged education that animates USCB's broader community mission.

For USCB, NIU, and Tri-C, the most meaningful innovations are the ones that extend the campus beyond their own walls, recognize learning, economic vitality, and community well-being as inseparable goals, and that position the institution not as a destination but as an active participant in enhancing the life of the places it calls home. ●

Our Next Issue

The July/August 2026 issue of *Insight Into Academia* will explore innovation in law schools and in marketing.

The advertising deadline is June 19. For more information or to reserve space, email ads@insightintoacademia.com.

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The Sagrado Experience: Rooted in Tradition. Committed to Innovation.

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Preparing students to thrive as professionals and engaged citizens.

Academic learning at Sagrado is integrated with personal development, professional preparation, and civic engagement. Every undergraduate develops a substantial entrepreneurial project of social impact and completes leadership training while building the critical thinking, research, digital literacy, and ethical competencies of our liberal arts core curriculum.

Advancing student learning through community-engaged education and public purpose.

As Puerto Rico's only institution with the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, Sagrado engages its surrounding communities as extended learning environments where students apply disciplinary knowledge in service of real social impact, cultivating ethical awareness, leadership, and a deep sense of civic responsibility.

Driving agile innovation through collaboration with industry and organizations.

Through our Schools of Arts, Design and Creative Industries, Business, Communications, and Health and Sciences, Sagrado fosters a culture of agile innovation by partnering with businesses, nonprofits, and public institutions to enrich learning through real-world collaboration. These partnerships connect academic work with emerging challenges — equipping graduates to navigate and shape the professional landscape rather than merely respond to it. Sagrado is also advancing Spanish-English bilingual programs to prepare graduates for a more interconnected world.



Testimonials

Arkansas State University

"As a past recipient of the Insight Into Academia HEED Award, Arkansas State University recognizes the importance of continuous reflection and growth. This application provided an opportunity to thoughtfully examine institutional practices across multiple areas and identify new ways to highlight the depth, breadth, and impact of our ongoing innovation efforts. Through this process, Arkansas State University reaffirms its commitment to advancing inclusive excellence, strategic innovation, and meaningful engagement in service of students, faculty, staff, and the communities we serve."



Cuyahoga Community College

"This has been an illuminating experience for our college to apply for this award. It is a comprehensive application that covers multiple areas of the college relevant to innovation and has provided a great opportunity for reflection and to engage with colleagues across the institution. The questions are relevant and timely to innovation in higher education, and the format of the survey and application works very well."

Lawrence Technical University

"The framework of the survey encourages institutions to examine innovation across multiple dimensions, including academic programs, research initiatives, student engagement, technology adoption, and campus operations, which provides a valuable opportunity for universities to reflect on how innovation is embedded throughout their organizations. We appreciate the thoughtful structure of the application and the recognition it provides to institutions committed to fostering innovation in higher education."

Augustana College

"We applied for the 2026 Insight Into Academia Top Colleges for Innovation Award because we strongly believe that practice and model innovation show how liberal arts colleges can meet the challenges of our time. The application prompts were helpful and encouraged us to reflect on innovation across the institution rather than focusing only on a few signature examples. Thank you for creating a process that recognizes innovation in context, including at institutions whose impact may be distinctive even if they operate at a smaller scale."

Coastal Bend College

"We applied because we believe rural community colleges should be recognized as leaders in higher education innovation. Institutions like ours are often closest to the realities students face and the workforce needs communities experience. As a result, we are often developing some of the most adaptive, student-centered, and partnership-driven solutions in the sector. Coastal Bend College is proud of that work, and we believe this award would help elevate both our institution and the broader role rural community colleges play in shaping the future of higher education."



Pikes Peak State College

"The Insight Into Academia Top Colleges for Innovation Award represents far more than a prestigious recognition. It plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of higher education at a critical juncture. In an era of constrained funding at federal, state, and local levels, innovation is no longer optional; it is essential for administrators, educators, and communities committed to expanding educational access and impact. This award serves a vital catalytic function by challenging institutions to engage in meaningful self-reflection, critically examine established processes, reimagine opportunities, and embrace innovation as a strategic imperative.

The application process itself becomes a powerful tool for institutional transformation, prompting colleges to articulate their innovative practices, identify areas for growth, and commit to continuous improvement. I deeply admire Insight Into Academia's steadfast dedication to elevating institutions that are becoming more dynamic, responsive, and innovative in meeting the rapidly evolving demands of the workforce and the complex challenges of preparing future leaders.

By celebrating innovation in higher education, you inspire institutions nationwide to push boundaries, take calculated risks, and prioritize student-centered solutions that create meaningful impact. Awards like this remind us that excellence in higher education is not static. It requires ongoing adaptation, creative problem-solving, and a willingness to challenge convention in service of student success and community transformation."



University at Albany

"The University at Albany is honored to recognize the transformative influence that Insight into Academia has in guiding higher education institutions toward meaningful advancement. This honor not only energizes our ongoing efforts but also strengthens our resolve to serve as a model of innovative excellence, ensuring these values are fully embedded across our campus policies, practices, and culture."



University of Maryland

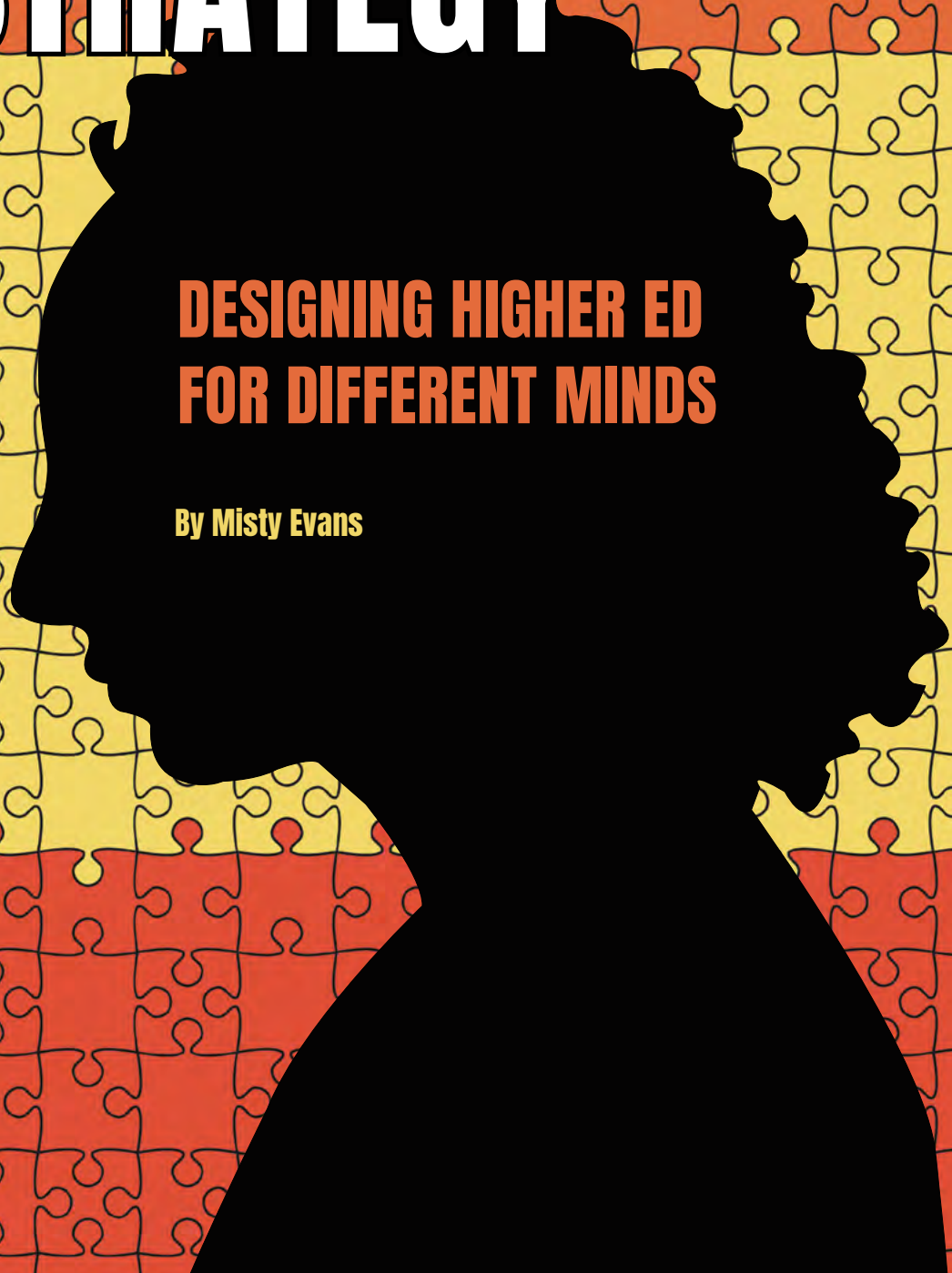
"After reviewing the questions included in the application, we realized we had an opportunity to learn more about the innovation initiatives going on across the campus in units and programs adjacent to those we often engage within the University's innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem. The application shared with them our vision for applying for this award and gives us an opportunity to have an ongoing conversation and collaboration with them around how their units and their work fit into UMD's overall innovation plan."



NEURODIVERSITY AS INNOVATION STRATEGY

**DESIGNING HIGHER ED
FOR DIFFERENT MINDS**

By Misty Evans



Half of the students at Landmark College began their college careers somewhere else and didn't succeed.

It's because the systems they entered were not designed for how they learn.

That reality is forcing a broader reckoning across higher education.

A growing number of leaders are confronting an uncomfortable truth: many of the barriers students face are not individual deficits, but the result of systems built around a narrow definition of learning.

In response, colleges and universities are beginning to move beyond patchwork support models toward a more fundamental shift, treating student success not as a set of services but as a design challenge embedded in the structure of the institution itself.

For decades, higher education has relied on a layered approach to student support, including tutoring centers, advising offices, and increasing disability accommodations. While these services remain essential, they are often disconnected from the core design of the academic experience.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 20% of undergraduates report having a disability, including learning and attention-related conditions.

At the same time, retention and completion gaps persist, particularly for those navigating executive function challenges, inconsistent academic preparation, or disengagement.

At the University of Utah Academic Innovation and Intelligence Lab, a cross-functional team is working to identify where students struggle and intervene before those challenges escalate. By combining institutional research, predictive analytics, design thinking, and AI-enabled tools, the lab operates as a centralized engine for experimentation and implementation.

Rather than launching isolated pilot programs, the lab focuses on scalable interventions, redesigning high-failure courses, building AI-guided advising

systems, and creating real-time feedback loops that allow faculty to adjust instruction based on student experience.

The goal is not simply to help students navigate existing systems, but to redesign them so fewer fall behind in the first place.

Neurodiversity and Higher Education

Nowhere are these design challenges more visible than in the experiences of neurodivergent students.

At Landmark, one of the nation's leading institutions dedicated to students with learning differences such as dyslexia, ADHD, and executive function challenges, the academic model is built entirely around cognitive diversity.

"Higher education assumes students arrive ready and more or less in the same place," said Landmark President Jim Dlugos. "We know that's not true."

Dlugos, who returned from retirement to lead Landmark in 2025 after nearly four decades in higher education, said

traditional models tend to prioritize disciplinary content while placing learning needs in a secondary position.

That approach can create significant barriers for students whose learning processes differ from institutional norms, particularly as the volume and pace of academic work increases.

Traditionally, accessibility has largely been addressed through accommodations. "Accommodations are the marker that we still haven't built the world right yet," Dlugos said.

In most institutions, they focus on inputs such as providing alternative formats for course materials or extending time on exams. While these supports can be helpful, they do not address how neurodivergent students process information, manage tasks, or engage with learning itself.

Research published in *Studies in Higher Education* has found that accommodation-based models often place the burden on students to adapt to rigid systems rather than prompting institutions to reevaluate those systems.



University of Utah Academic Innovation and Intelligence Lab.



Landmark College in Putney, Vermont.

At Landmark, the approach is different. The goal is not to retrofit access, but to design environments where fewer accommodations are necessary because obstacles have been reduced from the outset.

Designing for Variability

This approach aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning, a framework developed by CAST, a nonprofit organization focused on making learning accessible and effective for all students that encourages educators to create flexible learning environments that accommodate a wide range of learners.

At Landmark, that philosophy is embedded across the curriculum.

All first-year students take a foundational course, Perspectives in Learning, which focuses on helping them understand how they learn and develop strategies for self-advocacy. Advising is frequent and individualized, with an emphasis on executive functioning skills

such as time management, organization, and metacognition.

Classroom environments are also intentionally designed to support variability.

In a typical college classroom, students sit in rows under fluorescent lights and are expected to remain still and focused for extended periods. At Landmark, classrooms look and feel different with flexible layouts, varied seating options, and lighting designed to reduce sensory strain because even small design choices matter.

“Most classrooms reflect unacknowledged assumptions about learning,” Dlugos said. “Even something as simple as where the door is placed can affect how a student engages.”

Placing doors at the back of the room, for example, allows students to move without disrupting the class, an important consideration for those who need physical movement to maintain focus.

The college is also constructing

a new academic building designed using neuro-inclusive principles, with students involved in decisions about furniture, lighting, and spatial design.

Scaling High-touch Models

While Landmark offers a compelling model, scaling this approach across larger institutions presents challenges. One of the most significant is cost.

“This is high-touch, human-intensive work,” Dlugos said. “And that has implications for staffing and resources.”

Landmark maintains a student-to-staff ratio of approximately 3-to-1, a level of support that is difficult for many colleges and universities to replicate. That reality highlights a central question in higher education: how to design more human-centered systems in an environment increasingly driven by efficiency and cost control. Innovation labs and data-driven strategies offer one potential path forward.

By identifying patterns in student performance and engagement, institutions can target interventions more effectively, focusing resources where they will have the greatest impact.

At the University of Utah, predictive analytics tools help identify students at risk of falling behind, allowing advisors to intervene earlier. Course redesign efforts focus on high-failure “gateway” courses, where small changes can significantly improve retention.

These approaches do not replace human interaction, but they can make it more strategic and scalable.

The Role of Advising and Faculty Development

Experts point to advising and faculty development as critical levers for improving student success. At Landmark, students meet regularly with advisors to discuss how they are learning, where they are struggling, and what strategies can help them succeed.

“Advising can’t just be about course registration,” Dlugos said. “It has to

be about understanding how students are learning.”

Faculty development is equally important. Many institutions are beginning to invest in training that helps faculty understand neurodiversity and adopt more inclusive teaching practices. The Landmark College Institute for Research and Training works with colleges and universities nationwide to provide professional development focused on neuro-inclusive pedagogy.

A Broader Innovation Strategy

For many institutions, the implications of this work extend beyond neurodivergent students.

Designing for cognitive diversity can improve clarity, flexibility, and engagement in ways that benefit all learners, including those who may not identify as neurodivergent but still struggle within traditional models. In this sense, neurodiversity is not just a student support issue. It is an innovation strategy.

As higher education navigates financial pressures, enrollment shifts, and increasing demands for accountability, the ability to design systems that support a wide range of learners will become increasingly important.

Innovation labs and neuro-inclusive models offer complementary approaches, one focused on institutional infrastructure, the other on human-centered design.

Together, they point toward a future in which student success is not an add-on service or office, but a built-in feature of the educational experience. For institutions willing to rethink long-standing assumptions, the opportunity is clear. Designing for students whose needs differ from traditional systems does more than close gaps, it reveals a better model of learning itself.

The question is no longer whether higher education can afford to redesign its systems. It's whether it can afford not to. ●

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The New & Improved Orientation

UNIVERSITY

Designing First-Year Experiences That Actually Stick

By Misty Evans



Nearly one in four first-year students at U.S. colleges don't return for a second year, making the transition to college one of the most fragile and consequential moments in higher education, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

For institutions already facing enrollment pressures and financial strain, the stakes are clear. Retention is not just a student success metric. It's a revenue strategy, a reputation driver, and, increasingly, a test of institutional effectiveness.

That reality is reshaping one of the most overlooked components of the college experience: student orientation.

What was once a one-week introduction to campus life is being reimagined as a yearlong, data-informed system designed to help students adjust, thrive, and persist.

Across the country, colleges are replacing passive, front-loaded orientation models with extended first-year experiences that integrate academics, advising, belonging, and career development from day one.

Traditional orientation programs were built to deliver information: course registration, campus policies,

and resource awareness.

But research shows that information alone does not drive persistence because the first year is a complex transition that involves academic adjustment, identity development, and social integration. Institutions that treat orientation as a single event miss the opportunity to help students through that process.

More comprehensive onboarding models, often referred to as First-Year Experience, or FYE programs, address this by extending support across the academic year.

These programs combine coursework, advising, peer mentoring, and co-curricular engagement into a coordinated system. Studies from the Institute of Education Sciences have found that first-year seminars and structured learning communities can improve academic outcomes and persistence by increasing student engagement and self-efficacy.

This emerging model reframes orientation not as a moment of exposure, but as the beginning of continuous engagement. For example, at Arizona State University, one of the largest public universities in the country,

the challenge is not just supporting students, but doing so at scale.

ASU's freshman retention rate has reached approximately 86.7%, well above the national average, according to university reporting. That performance is tied to a deliberate redesign of the first-year experience, one that prioritizes early and sustained connection.

A central component is peer engagement. Through structured "buddy" and mentoring programs, new students are paired with experienced upperclassmen who guide them through academic and social transitions.

The model works because it removes the burden from students to seek help on their own. Support is embedded into their daily experience from the start so that it preempts future struggles. It shows that connection cannot be optional if retention is the goal.

Decades of research back up this approach, as a sense of belonging is one consistent predictor of student success. Students who feel connected to their institution, their classmates, and their academic environment are significantly more likely to succeed. Institutions are increasingly treating belonging not as a byproduct of

campus life, but as infrastructure that must be intentionally designed.

Cohort-based models, shared coursework, and structured peer interaction are all mechanisms to achieve this. These approaches reduce the anonymity of large campuses, increase meaningful interaction, and create smaller communities within larger systems.

Few institutions have demonstrated the impact of data-driven student success strategies as clearly as Georgia State University through its National Institute for Student Success. The Institute has helped redesign first-year experiences across multiple partner institutions by embedding predictive analytics into

structures through cohort-based learning communities. Students are grouped by academic interest or shared identity and take courses together while participating in coordinated advising and programming.

Research from the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience organization and Students in Transition shows that these communities increase engagement and persistence by strengthening peer relationships and faculty interaction. The benefit is twofold. Students experience a stronger sense of belonging while also engaging more deeply with their academic work.

At the University of Utah, first-year experience initiatives emphasize

information session into an active diagnostic tool. When used effectively, these systems allow institutions to personalize support at scale, something traditional models could not achieve.

A growing number of colleges are also embedding career development into the first-year experience. Rather than waiting until later in a student's academic journey, career exploration, goal-setting, and professional identity development are introduced in the first semester.

This approach addresses a critical question that often goes unanswered early on: Why am I here? Students who can connect their academic experience to future goals are more

Students who feel connected to their institution, their classmates and their academic environment are significantly more likely to succeed. Institutions are increasingly treating belonging not as a byproduct of campus life, but as infrastructure that must be intentionally designed.

advising and onboarding systems.

The results are measurable. Across seven Georgia institutions working with the Institute, first-year retention increased by an average of 6.7 percentage points in a single year, with some campuses seeing gains of nearly 15 points, according to university data.

Instead of waiting for midterm grades or academic failure, institutions used real-time data to identify early signals of disengagement, missed assignments, registration issues, or lack of course access, and intervened immediately.

The model also included structural changes such as block scheduling, redesigned first-year courses aligned with academic pathways, and streamlined communication strategies. When institutions act early and consistently, small interventions can produce significant gains.

Another defining feature of modern first-year experience design is the integration of academic and social

a holistic understanding of student success. Institutional research highlights that programs are most effective when they address both academic performance and students' social and emotional well-being.

First-year seminars and coordinated support structures are designed to integrate students into the academic and social fabric of the university. Rather than treating these as separate domains, they are recognized as interdependent.

Technology is also reshaping how institutions design onboarding efforts. Digital orientation platforms allow students to engage with content before arriving on campus, revisit materials as needed and access resources on demand. More importantly, they generate data.

Institutions are increasingly using predictive analytics to identify students who may be at risk academically or socially and intervene early. This transforms orientation from a passive

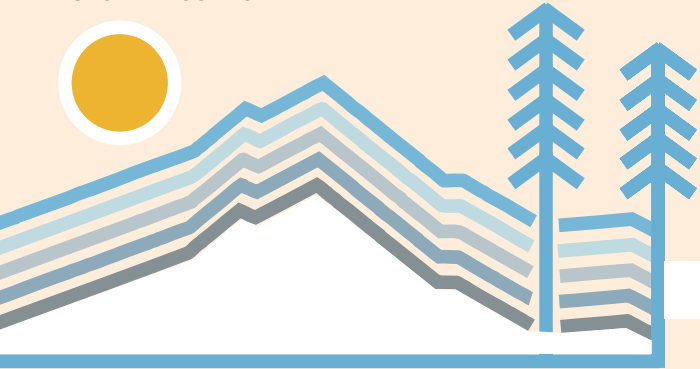
likely to remain engaged.

The most significant shift in orientation design is its duration. The one-week experience is now a continuous engagement strategy that extends across the first year and often beyond.

Institutions seeing the greatest gains are the ones that treat the first year as the beginning of a journey, employing a system that is comprehensive, sustainable, measured, and continuously improved.

Orientation is no longer about welcoming students to campus with a slideshow and a get-acquainted mingle, it's about ensuring they get the support they need to stay on campus.

By extending onboarding across the first year, embedding belonging into program design and leveraging data to guide interventions, colleges and universities are expanding student retention and success. ●



Oregon's Benefits Navigators:

A Statewide Bet on Students' Basic Needs

By Erik Cliburn

When Oregon lawmakers passed legislation in 2021 requiring every public college and university to hire a dedicated benefits navigator, they were responding to a crisis hiding in plain sight.

Research from early 2020 had found that nearly 70% of Oregon college students had experienced food insecurity, and 20% had faced housing instability within the previous year.

The new law, backed by \$5 million allocated to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC), created a new campus role—staff trained to connect students with SNAP, housing assistance, health care, and other public resources they were eligible for but often never accessed.

Four years later, that infrastructure is being tested by rising student need, shrinking budgets, and a federal landscape growing more hostile to social support programs.

From Single Navigator to Peer Network

The early results from individual campuses were striking. At Oregon State University (OSU), basic needs navigator Miguel Arellano helped students access more than \$800,000 in state and federal assistance in just three years before the 2021 law even took effect. But as demand grew, OSU discovered a single navigator model couldn't keep pace. Students were waiting a month or more for appointments.

OSU scrapped that approach and rebuilt one around a peer-to-peer model of trained student workers who have utilized the system themselves, and became available on a drop-in basis.

Today, the OSU Basic Needs Center offers free laundry, emergency showers, a hygiene pantry, a textbook lending library, and SNAP application support, all staffed primarily by students. The team recently expanded to 24 peer navigators.

The philosophy behind the model is deliberate. "We do it with our students; we don't do it for them," says peer navigator Susie Ortiz, a third-year nutrition and dietetics major. "A lot of that is to help build self-efficacy and autonomy. We're here to help guide and have it be a learning experience."

That approach addresses the stigma of seeking help, which often serves as a major barrier. Asking for assistance with food or housing can feel deeply personal, and peer navigators—who have faced similar challenges—can make those conversations less daunting.

Navigators Across the State

While OSU's peer model has drawn attention, the legislative mandate created navigator positions across all 17 community colleges and seven public universities in Oregon. The HECC distributes funding to each institution and supports a statewide Community of Practice, convened by Portland Community College, where navigators share best practices and coordinate professional development.

At Rogue Community College in southern Oregon, Resource Coordinator Susan Bame has personally assisted more than 1,500 students by distributing emergency funds, grocery cards, gas cards, and school supplies, while also advocating for those experiencing homelessness.

The college's Osprey Care Fund has provided nearly \$135,000 to more than 350 students since 2019. Bame helped build a virtual Advocacy and Resource Center connecting students to campus and community resources, and she kept the college's food pantries running by herself one summer when the coordinator departed unexpectedly.

The breadth of the work reflects what navigators say is the job's essential character—meeting students wherever they are.

"Each student's situation is unique," says Bame. "I work closely with individuals to navigate complex systems, including applying for public benefits like SNAP, TANF, and the Oregon Health Plan."

For Bame, the stakes of that work are inseparable from broader questions of equity and economic mobility.

"By addressing the non-academic challenges that disproportionately affect low-income and first-generation college students, we can close equity gaps, increase graduation rates, and bolster our local and state economies," she says. "Funding these positions is a cost-effective strategy to ensure that taxpayer dollars invested in education yield the highest return."

Political Headwinds and Budget Pressure

For the third consecutive year, student advocates are pressing the Oregon Legislature to expand basic needs funding. A package of bills—House Bills 3182 and 3183—would allocate \$18.5 million in new investment, with \$10 million directed at the existing benefits navigator programs. Another

There is a great sense of belonging at my institution.

\$6.5 million would support affordable college housing efforts and \$2 million would fund low-cost textbooks.

However, the timing is difficult. A state revenue forecast released in May projected Oregon will have roughly \$500 million less to spend in the next budget cycle. Meanwhile, potential federal rollbacks of student support programs have amplified urgency among proponents, who argue that state investment must step in where the federal government may pull back.

Many navigators have operated with little to no direct budget since their positions were created. The new bills would, for the first time, give some of them dedicated funding above and beyond their salaries. “When students have access to the support they need, they are more likely to graduate, secure meaningful employment, and contribute positively to our communities,” Bame says.

What's at Stake

Oregon has previously projected that 300,000 new jobs will require some form of post-secondary credential between 2020 and 2030, but the state is on pace to award only 200,000 by decade's end.

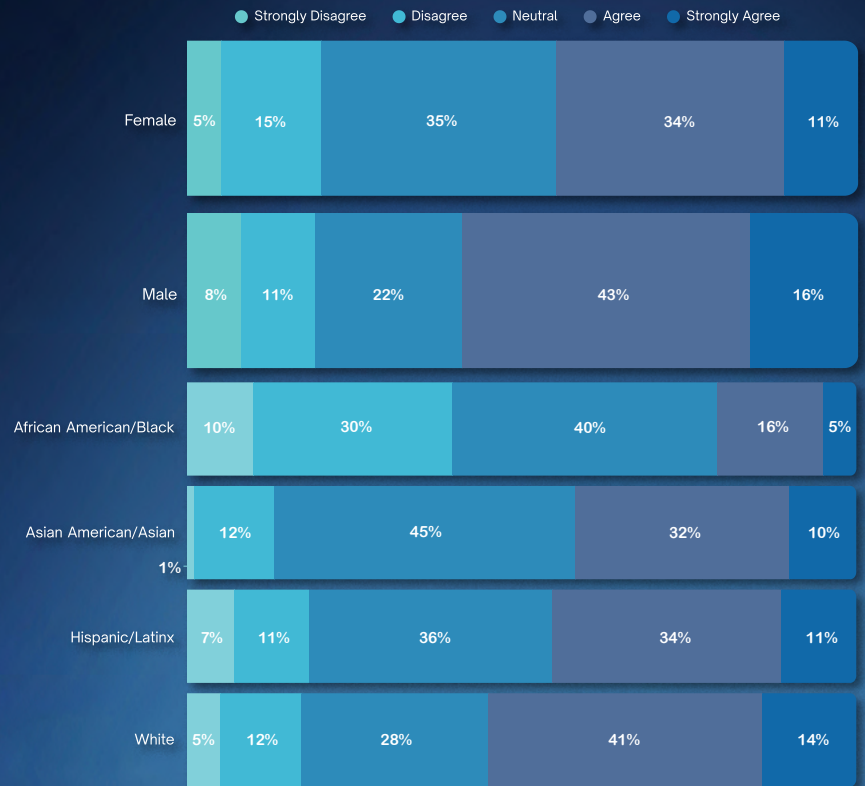
Supporters argue that addressing basic needs is inseparable from closing that gap. When students can't afford rent or food, the credential gap widens with them.

The case is less abstract for those who have lived it.

Across Oregon campuses, navigators describe a pattern—a student arrives in crisis, gets connected to emergency housing or food assistance, stabilizes, and goes on to finish their degree.

It's a sequence that basic needs advocates say repeats itself often enough to make the math compelling—and the argument for sustained investment hard to dismiss.

Whether Oregon's legislative approach proves durable may depend on what happens in Salem this session—and whether lawmakers decide that keeping students housed and fed is a workforce strategy, not just a social service. ●



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North Carolina Expands Direct Admissions Reach

By Erik Cliburn

More than 23,000 North Carolina public high school seniors have accepted direct admission offers to colleges and universities through NC College Connect, the state's streamlined pathway to higher education, now in its second full year of operation.

From August 2025 through January 2026, students accepted upward of 88,000 offers from participating state institutions—a figure that represents roughly 21% of North Carolina's Class of 2026.

The program launched with a limited pilot in fall 2024, and has expanded significantly to include 11 UNC System universities, 29 private colleges and universities, and all 58 of the state's community colleges. In its first year, the program reached just over 3,000 students, making the growth in year two all the more striking.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Maurice Green calls clear postsecondary pathways central to his broader goals for North Carolina's public schools.

"NC College Connect provides students with a simple process for learning about colleges where they meet the admissions criteria," he says. "That so many students have taken advantage of this opportunity is incredibly exciting."

Eligible seniors—those attending North Carolina public high schools with a weighted GPA of 2.8 or above who meet specified course requirements—receive

automatic admission to a curated list of participating schools without completing a traditional application.

Students log into a portal through CFNC.org, where they see which institutions have offered them direct admission and can accept by submitting a brief form. Most applications through the portal are free, and fees for private colleges and universities are waived entirely.

The portal also walks students through information about financial aid, available majors, and next steps post high school graduation—resources that they say have made the college-going process feel significantly less overwhelming.

Some institutions require a higher GPA than the 2.8 minimum, and a number of private colleges require additional criteria such as foreign language coursework.

This year marked the first time North Carolina's independent colleges and universities participated in NC College Connect as a group. Hope Williams, EdD, president of the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities statewide office, says the volume of student interest validated the expansion.

"The outpouring of applications shows that there is strong demand for what our colleges and universities offer, and that is a win for students, our colleges and universities, and our state," she says.

University of North Carolina System President Peter Hans emphasizes the

broader stakes of keeping young North Carolinians on a path toward higher education.

"All North Carolinians benefit when we nurture the talent and ambition of our young people," he says. "NC College Connect makes it simpler than ever for promising high school graduates to keep learning, keep striving, and keep contributing to our state."

The program also appears to have bolstered College Application Week in October, during which many North Carolina institutions waive application fees. More than 117,000 applications were submitted that week through CFNC and the Common App, an increase of 8.7% over the prior year.

Jeff Cox, EdD, president of the North Carolina Community College System, credited the collaboration between the state's various education sectors for the program's reach.

"This program is showing students that they have what it takes to go to college, and it's making it easier than ever for them to access these opportunities," he says.

NC College Connect is a collaboration between the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the UNC System, the North Carolina Community College System, North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, and College Foundation Inc. It's scheduled to return for the 2026–27 academic year. ●



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First-Generation Students Are Closing the Graduation Gap, But Work Remains

By Erik Cliburn

More than half of all college undergraduates in the United States are the first in their families to pursue higher education. Yet despite representing 54% of the undergraduate population, first-generation students graduate at a rate of just 24%, compared to 59% for those whose parents attended college. That chasm has prompted a growing national movement to transform how institutions recruit, support, and retain this population.

The reasons for doing so are significant. According to FirstGen Forward, an initiative born from a partnership between the Suder Foundation and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, closing the completion gap would produce 4.4 million additional college graduates and deliver a net benefit of \$700 billion to the U.S. economy.



By 2031, an estimated 72% of American jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training, making first-generation student success a matter of national economic urgency, not just educational equity. Potential students are also applying to college at twice the rate of their continuing-generation peers, a sign of surging demand that institutions have yet to fully meet on the back end with adequate support and resources.

The barriers first-generation students face are less about academic preparation than navigation. Many arrive on campus without what researchers call “college knowledge,” an intuitive understanding of how to work the system, find support, and advocate for themselves.

Without family members who have been through the process, they are left to make their way through advising bureaucracies, financial aid verification, and career services largely on their own.

They are also disproportionately students of color, veterans, and students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving Institutions, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving Institutions, compounding the structural disadvantages many already face.

Kristen Renn, PhD, a professor at Michigan State University who studies low-income, first-generation college students, has written that higher education functions simultaneously as an engine of social mobility and a machine of social reproduction. While a college degree improves economic outcomes for first-generation graduates, wealth gaps persist even after degree completion.

The median household wealth for first-generation graduates stands at \$152,000, compared to \$244,500 for those who followed a parent’s path to a diploma. Even the likelihood of pursuing advanced degrees differs with 35% of first-generation college graduates earning a master’s, professional, or doctoral degree, compared to 43% of their peers.

Institutions recognized as making meaningful progress share several characteristics. They name and support first-generation identity explicitly in orientation programming, campus signage, and institutional culture, rather than treating it as an afterthought. They establish dedicated resource centers and train faculty to understand the specific pressures these students navigate.

Addressing what educators call the “hidden curriculum” is also critical. This refers to the unspoken norms and unwritten expectations that continuing-generation students absorb from their families but that first gens must discover on their own—such as approaching faculty and navigating research opportunities to securing internships—often after costly missteps. And effective institutions deploy visibility campaigns that signal belonging from the moment a student arrives.

One such approach involves inviting faculty and staff to publicly self-identify as first-generation graduates. Renn describes the impact of these campaigns in straightforward terms.

“Visibility campaigns like ‘I’m First’ provide ways for staff and faculty to self-identify as first-generation college graduates themselves, providing role models and inspiration to [Low-Income, First-Generation (LIFG)] students,” she says, adding that structural change must accompany these gestures. “It is important to transform colleges and universities so that they do not require so much resilience for LIFG students to persist and thrive.”

Mentorship programs have also emerged as a high-impact tool, particularly when mentors share similar backgrounds or have navigated comparable challenges.

Alumni and faculty who were themselves first-generation graduates can offer targeted guidance, introduce students to professional networks, and help them make decisions about majors and career paths with greater confidence.

Workshops addressing financial literacy, imposter syndrome, and unwritten workplace norms round out what many practitioners describe as a

holistic support model.

FirstGen Forward, now the premier initiative of its kind, has built a national network of more than 470 colleges across 47 states committed to advancing these efforts.

Members participate in a phased journey, from Network Member to Network Leader to Network Champion, gaining access to professional development, data tools, peer collaboration, and expert guidance aimed at driving systemic, scalable change.

The organization has set an ambitious goal of adding hundreds of additional schools to the network over the next four to six years.

Their strategy extends beyond individual campuses. Through coalitions with partners including the American Council on Education, the Council for Opportunity in Education, and the Black First-Gen Collective, FirstGen Forward is pressing for federal and state policy changes, stronger data infrastructure, and greater accountability from institutions and employers alike.

Practical guidance from higher education consultants emphasizes that effective support must be both visible and structural.

Early outreach, mentorship programs, financial aid transparency, and explicit policies that remove hidden barriers all play important roles. Technology-assisted interventions, family engagement, and student-led initiatives round out comprehensive approaches.

Engaging families directly is particularly valuable, since orienting first-generation parents to the expectations and rhythms of college life can extend students’ support network beyond the campus itself.

The message from researchers and practitioners is consistent: honoring the resilience of first-generation students is necessary but insufficient. What’s required is institutional transformation so that succeeding in college doesn’t demand extraordinary resilience in the first place. ●

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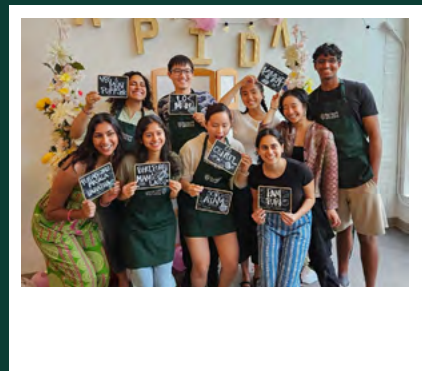
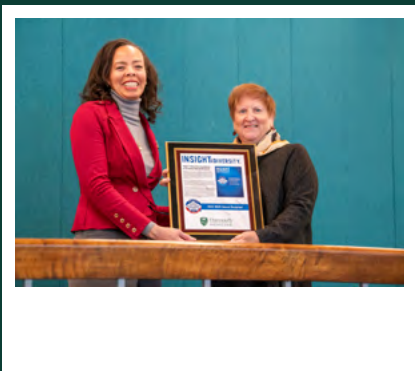


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