

Gina Marcelli-Munk

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The role of our four-year universities and colleges and their changing environment has come under scrutiny. As we learn and understand educational reform and the demands of society, it is essential to look at what a four-year college should represent and strive to achieve.

A four-year college degree is to further your education and prepare individuals for a career. It gives everyone the skills and education to get a job and support themselves and their families.

According to Labaree, three over-arching and competing goals shape education: democratic equality (preparing citizens), social efficiency (train workers), and social mobility (prepare individuals for social positions) (Cuellar, Garcia, & Saichaie, 2022). Those who want to pursue higher education should have access to it. All of us should have the opportunity to pursue a four-year degree, which includes individuals with learning disabilities and other challenges, to access the tools and support needed to thrive in a collegiate environment.

One of the issues with higher education today is access, financial issues, and resources. The pandemic created more inequalities in higher education, especially for those who could not afford the technology, including internet access. The rapid change from traditional learning to online learning allowed us to see how the lack of access to these resources impacted those from marginalized communities. Because of the importance of access to reliable internet sources, those who could afford access had opportunities to engage in online learning, while those without faced challenges. Soria et al. (2022) found that students with minoritized identities had higher odds of experiencing financial hardships (i.e., losing a job, reduced wages, unexpected living and technology expenses, loss/reduction in financial aid, food insecurity, housing insecurity) than their peers with privileged identities (as cited in McClure et al., 2023, p. 5). However, switching to online learning during the pandemic also brought concerns about learning loss and academic differences among students from disadvantaged communities. The limited

access to technology and resources may have emphasized the pre-existing problems and widened gaps in academic success. Scholars have found that the biggest impediments to online education for students were Wi-Fi quality, finding a quiet place to study, and the financial burdens of survival and household responsibilities (McClure et al., 2023, p. 6). Higher education must address these challenges, and it is crucial to implement equal solutions that prioritize support for students facing any barriers that will interfere with success. Removing those obstacles and setting students up for success might mean starting special programs to help with learning, providing digital tools for education, and giving faculty training for better online teaching. By doing these things, colleges can help all students do well in their classes, no matter their socioeconomic or learning barriers.

As we discover the difficulties of higher education, it becomes evident that the traditional ways of four-year colleges and universities are evolving in response to the changes in society and the new challenges ahead of us. I believe the foundation of higher education remains focused on academic and career development; as the environment changes, academia must take a closer look at its role in promoting equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

In considering the intent of public higher education institutions, it is crucial to recognize that they play vital roles in society, providing individuals from different backgrounds with the opportunity to engage in lifelong learning and community involvement. However, realizing this idea has yet to be the norm, the difficulties in accessing and the outcomes continue to be the same experience for marginalized communities. Addressing these issues requires an approach beyond traditional academics, including equity, diversity, and social justice principles.

The concept of the "5th Wave" of the Academic Enterprise model offers a reformation of higher education in a way that prioritizes inclusivity and student success. This shift challenges the

traditional focus on exclusivity and consumer-driven education, advocating for different approaches that recognize the value of every student and prioritize their needs and experiences. According to our module reading on the 5th Wave, enrollment and degree completion have declined for the first time in over a decade in students aged 18-24. If individuals are to succeed in an era when knowledge correlates with prosperity and well-being—and if the United States is to retain its leadership and competitiveness in the globalized knowledge economy—millions more people will need access to learning environments that integrate comprehensive liberal arts curricula with the cutting-edge new knowledge and research techniques essential to the post-industrial workforce (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 2). By following the principles of the 5th Wave, higher education can create a community of belonging and empowerment where all students are supported in their journey of academic and personal growth. If the Fifth Wave model insists that broad accessibility and academic excellence are complementary and synergistic, this claim is no longer merely rhetorical or conjectural (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 6).

Navigating the constantly changing environment of higher education, especially when discussing the 5th Wave model, requires a change in understanding the challenges students with learning disabilities encounter. The 5th Wave principles in governance can change how colleges and universities consider their decision-making with the needs of stakeholders. By being transparent with inclusive governance practices, institutions can effectively improve accountability while serving their public mission. As higher education transitions through the 5th Wave, it is important to assess its impact on the forms of governance and decision-making processes. This includes examining how focusing on inclusivity and student success influences leadership roles and policy development.

My daughter's journey through traditional education highlights the need for equal access and support in academic environments. Many students, like my daughter, face considerable hurdles due to their learning differences, like those with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. She has struggled to access the necessary tools and accommodations for success both online and in the classrooms. For instance, essential resources like talk-to-text software and audio-format textbooks were not accessible to her without additional expenses on our part. She also experienced some instructors' inflexibility, which complicated her struggles in the past. She encountered resistance when requesting to review course material before class or record lectures for later review. Then, the transition to online testing presented a new set of challenges. The online testing formats, with small fonts and time constraints, intensified her struggles. She had difficulties focusing, and there was no teacher-student interaction for immediate feedback, leading to stress and poor test performance. The 5th Wave envisions the emergence of a league of colleges and universities unified in their resolve to accelerate positive social outcomes through the integration of world-class knowledge production and cutting-edge technological innovation with access to the broadest possible representation of the socioeconomic and intellectual diversity of the nation (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 3).

It is essential to explore further specific strategies and support for students with learning disabilities in higher education. Things like broader support services, inclusive teaching practices, and policies to advocate for a more accessible learning environment. Other things to consider are strategies for alternative assessments and technology that can help address their needs and promote academic success.

Imagine a society where very few people have access to knowledge and opportunity, where pursuing an education is suppressed, and where decisions about education are made behind

closed doors. This scary scenario shows the dangers of weakening the merit of public higher education and its rights.

Public higher education incorporates the ideas of equality, inclusivity, and collaborative decision-making, so everyone's voices are heard. By providing affordable and accessible education, regardless of their background or circumstance, public institutions are a pathway to social mobility and economic success. Offering paths to improve lives and contribute to our communities and society. Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of the individual teacher or the institution (American Association of University Professors, 1970).

The center of public higher education is its rights, including academic freedom and governance. Academic freedom means faculty members and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation (Nelson, 2010). It creates an environment where all points of view are valued and encouraged, critical thinking is welcomed, and knowledge is improved through discussion and research.

In public higher education, governance systems promote transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Faculty, staff, students, and the community are involved in decision-making, making certain that policies are in line with the needs and values. This method builds confidence and cultivates a feeling of involvement in higher education's missions and goals.

## References

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