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American universities are at a make-or-break moment

It's a reckoning for higher education that's long overdue, writes Bradley University's president. Here's the way forward.

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American higher education as we know it is facing a reckoning. And frankly, it's long overdue.

From 1870 to 2010, higher education in the United States experienced almost constant growth of traditional undergraduate students. In the 2010s, demand flattened for the first time in 140 years.

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That kind of growth streak is unheard of in every other industry, which explains why higher education as a business must now play catch up. For over a century, we operated American universities with the mindset of "If we build it, they will come." We built it, and they came in droves from all over the

world.

The problem is that American universities were built from the inside out, based on what administrators and faculty think is needed. Market research and sensitivity to what students want and need got little attention.



To make matters worse, higher education now has an estimated 25% excess capacity, [according to research](#) by Ernst & Young and the Lumina Foundation. We also expect a 10% to 15% decline in demand for higher education by 2027, partly due to the pandemic and a lower birth rate during the Great Recession.

In the years ahead, some universities will have to close for good.

Despite these challenges, I remain optimistic about the future of American higher education.

This is a historic opportunity for university administrators and faculty to think about what we do and why. The future of American higher education belongs to universities and colleges prioritizing students' needs and interests. We must rethink how we build the modern university and place students at the center.

To create this paradigm shift, we've got to turn many things upside down. To start, that means getting under the hood and critically looking at what's happening on our campuses.

At Bradley University, where I joined as president in 2020, we engaged in a distinctly different strategic planning process. For most universities, strategic planning takes place in an internal vacuum. You discuss what you think you're good at, what you want to offer to the marketplace and develop a strategy around that.

We took a distinctly different approach and sought data to guide our decisions. We hired Questor, a consumer research firm, to interview 1,600 prospective students; they included people who considered Bradley, a handful who enrolled at Bradley and even people who never considered us. That broad spectrum of students was key to understanding the market's needs.

Once we had the data, we held focus groups on campus to see how the research resonated with our current students. Finally, we created our streamlined strategic plan that is directional in nature and focused explicitly on the needs and interests of today's students. With these new directives, we are making significant changes on campus. Some of them are highly visible, like our Office of Inclusive Excellence placement in the heart of academic activities on campus. Our new vice president of DEI now reports directly to me.

To ensure students are on the right life path, we are integrating "life design" methodology as a foundational experience for each of our students. We are also transforming the advising process by decoupling it from a specific major so students don't feel trapped if they want to change academic directions. Ultimately, our goal is to ensure ROI for our students by getting them on the right lift path for both short-term career success and long-term happiness.

This also requires us to graduate our students at a higher rate. While our current six-year graduation rate is higher than the national average of 64%, we need to do better. Our goal is to achieve a 90%-



plus graduation rate to ensure our students are getting a strong return on investment.

American universities are failing many of today's students by assuming our "one size fits all" traditional education model is appropriate for all students. Our job is to stop making assumptions about their needs and interests, and instead, we must actively guide students on their personalized educational journeys.

Ultimately, university administrators and faculty are in the business of helping our students achieve their life goals through higher education. We lost sight of that because of favorable market conditions, but it is not too late to build student-centric universities. The future of

American education depends on it.

Stephen Standifird is president of Bradley University in Peoria.

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