

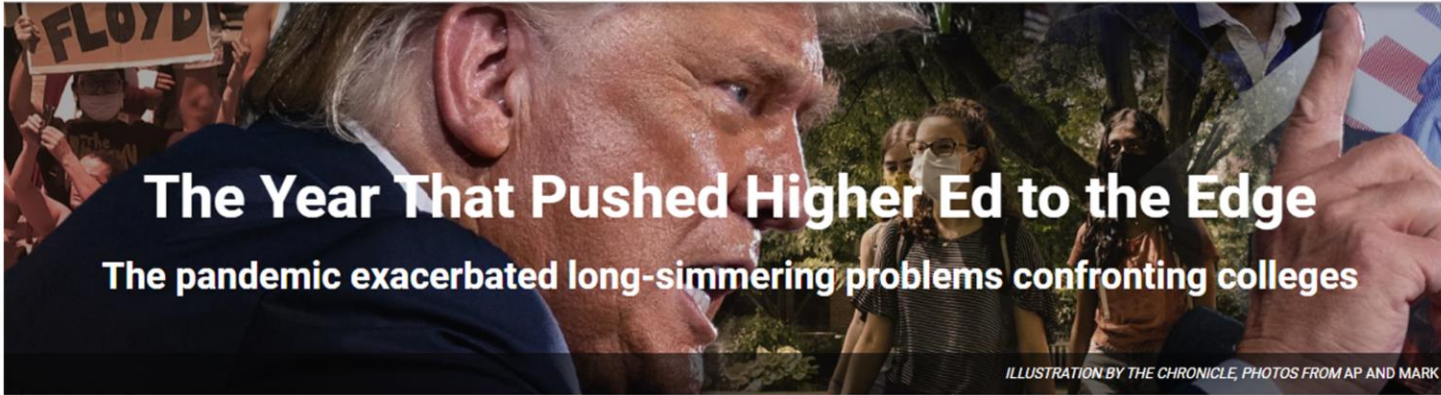
Responding to existential crisis: An examination of organizational adaptation over four decades

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AERA 2022



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The Year That Pushed Higher Ed to the Edge

The pandemic exacerbated long-simmering problems confronting colleges

ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE, PHOTOS FROM AP AND MARK A

EDUCATION

These colleges survived World Wars, the Spanish flu and more. They couldn't withstand COVID-19 pandemic.

Elinor Aspegren USA TODAY

Published 11:26 p.m. ET Jan. 28, 2021 | Updated 9:58 a.m. ET March 29, 2021



THE REVIEW



Will Coronavirus Close Your College for Good?

For 20 percent of institutions, this may be an existential moment, says Robert Zemsky

By *David Wescott* | MARCH 25, 2020



Questions & Approach

- 1) Since 1980, what shifts in the organizational environment threatened HEIs, especially this subsector?
- 2) Historically, what actions have HEIs taken to respond to (and survive) these environmental challenges?
- 3) What has come of past predictions of closures?
- 4) What does the past suggest about HEIs' navigation of environmental challenges that emerged in 2020?



Conceptual Framing

Sector	Description
Social	The “class structure, demographics, mobility patterns, lifestyles, social movements, and traditional social institutions” surrounding the organization
Cultural	The “history, tradition, normative expectations for behavior, beliefs, and values” of the organizational context.
Legal	The “constitutions, laws, and legal practices of the nation” in which the organization is situated.
Political	The “distribution and concentration of power and the nature of political systems” in which the organization exists.
Economic	The “labor and financial markets, and markets for goods and services” of the organization.
Technological	The “scientific developments and applications that organizations can acquire and use to produce outputs”.
Physical	The “natural resources and the effects of nature” pertaining to the organization.

Hatch’s (2013, p. 61) 7 sectors of the organizational environment



Environmentally-induced existential crossroads

- Present as crisis to HEIs survival (e.g., their *existence*)
- Require institutional reconsideration or revisiting of purpose (e.g., *existential reflection*)



Key 'existential' moments



1980-90s “Birth Dearth”

- Declining white, male pop. of 1960s-70s
- Predictions of closure of non-profit, private, including ‘Invisible Colleges’ (Keller, 1983; Hammond, 1984; Tarrant et al., 2017;)
- Diversifying of offerings and students (Breneman, 1994; Cameron, 1984; Chaffee, 1984; Tarrant et al., 2017)

Environmental Domains: Social (demographics)

Existential question: *Who* are our students?



Key 'existential' moments



1990-2000s: Rise for-profit & online ed

- Non-profit, private, regional colleges w/adult and part-time offerings most threatened (Winston, 1999; Breneman et al., 2006)
- Online as costly to start up + potential incongruency with small, private college norms/values (Fischer, 2006; Mayhew & Vasallo, 2017; Marcy 2020)
- Cultural shift with student as client, availability and delivery expectations (Breneman et al., 2006)

Environmental Domains: Cultural + Technological

Existential question: *How do we educate?*



Key 'existential' moments



2010s: Recession + ↑ vocationalization/politicization

- Great Recession → rise of 'stress tests' + predictions of closure (Hearn & Ciarimboli, 2017; Horn, 2018; Veddar, 2018)
- Attitudinal shifts “disfavo[ring] smaller private colleges”
Hearn & Ciarimboli, 2017, p. 205)
 - Vocational (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Brint et al., 2005; Ferrell, 2011; Selingo, 2018)
 - Political (Bowen, 2014; Gandara, 2019; Jaschik, 2017; Parker, 2019)

Environmental Domains: Economic, Cultural + Political
Existential question: What do we stand for?



Organizational Adaptations

- Financial adjustments and cost-containment actions
- Restructuring marketing and enrollment strategies
- Employing new leadership and cross-sector partnerships
- ‘Revitalizing’ the institution’s mission and purpose to better speak to current context



Back to 2020...

Sector	1980 - present	2020
Social	X	Class & raced-based disparity in pandemic experience; Racist violence (B. Taylor, G. Floyd, Anti-Asian hate crimes)
Cultural	X	Remote HE delivery expectations
Legal	X	Presidential threats to (liberal) HEIs
Political	X	Highly charged election, Jan. 6 th insurrection
Economic	X	Pandemic-induced recession
Technological	X	Rapid transition to online
Physical		Covid-19 Pandemic



Takeaways & Ongoing Questions

- Predictions may have again underestimated HEIs resilience and adaptive capacity
 - Did CARES Act funding just delay closures?
- Shadow side of organizational adaptation
 - Morale
 - Resource-based disparity in institutional experiences
 - Academic capitalism, interest convergence, identity capitalism



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