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Finding Your Unicorns: Creating a Data-Informed Culture

By Richard L. Riccardi, ScD

A recent article, "Higher Education's Data Experts Face a Crossroads," in the Chronicle of Higher Education examines the changing profile of institutional researchers. Akin to the characters in the movie Ghostbusters, historically, they were the people you called for help when making decisions that required data.

One could argue that in this era of self-serve business intelligence, there is an expectation that all academic leaders and their staff will be data experts, finding the answers they seek with just a click of the mouse or a swipe of the finger. It is an admirable goal, and something that sellers of this type of software will tell you is achievable because you just "plug it in and it works." In our reality of "more with less," academic leaders struggle to manage the demands of their day-to-day operations; dedicating time in their busy days to the complexity of data analysis is just not an option. Turning to their support staff for assistance yields mixed results because many in these data-related jobs have never been trained in the nuanced world of data analysis, assuming that these software solutions will magically provide the Holy Grail of answers to all their problems.

Adding the ingredients of increased accountability, accreditation demands, and competition among schools for a declining high school graduate population results in a perfect storm for analysis paralysis. Universities know they need good data to make good decisions, but they lack the internal resources to make those strategic and operating decisions. As resources become scarcer, one of the most important decisions a university makes is who to hire. Those hiring opportunities are few and far between, so it is important to identify the expertise desired in our prospective employees. In the Chronicle article, Randy L. Swing, former executive director of the Association for Institutional Research, speaks of institutional researchers, but he could be speaking about all future hires when he states, "It's a new day, and people will need new kinds of skills."

So when it comes to data and this new skill set, what are universities looking for? A data scientist. Harvard Business Review called it the "sexiest job of the 21st century" and Information Week defined it as the "unicorn" of skill sets. The job title was coined in 2008 by D. J. Patil and Jeff Hammerbacher, then the respective leaders of analytics efforts at LinkedIn and Facebook. Demand for data scientists in the United States is projected to be 50–60 percent greater than the supply by 2018, resulting in a shortage of around 150,000 people. With starting salaries projected to be close to the six-figure range, it is no wonder that this job is one of the hottest in all industries, making these individuals difficult to hire and retain.

They are a rare breed: a true blend of art and science. They can coax treasure out of messy data and communicate it effectively—a powerful combination. Many of the data scientists employed in business fields today were formally trained in mathematics, computer science, or economics, but they can materialize from any field that has a strong data and computational focus. But having just that foundation is not enough, because data scientists also need the social skills to analyze problems creatively, collaborate with their colleagues to understand the strategy, and present the findings visually and even artistically. The key characteristics are summarized below:

- Technical expertise: The best data scientists typically have deep expertise in some scientific discipline.
- Curiosity: They have the desire to go beneath the surface and discover and distill a problem down to a very clear set of hypotheses that can be tested.
- Storytelling: They have the ability to use data to tell a story and communicate it effectively.
- Cleverness: They have the ability to look at a problem in different, creative ways.

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The Next Pivot for Successful Liberal Arts Colleges: The 2020s

Nicholas Ladany, PhD

Since the nineteenth century, pundits have predicted, at best, an ambivalence toward the future of liberal education (Koch 1977) and, at worst, the doom of liberal education and liberal arts colleges in the United States (Jones, 2016). Although each decade has brought with it new predictions for the downfall of liberal arts colleges, the extinction has yet to occur. At each step of the way, the evolution of liberal education has outpaced the gloomy predictions.

Why have liberal arts colleges proven to be so resilient to the changing landscape of higher education? To be sure, what it means to receive a liberal education has evolved in many ways from around the time of the Yale report of 1828 (Committee of the Corporation, and the Academical Faculty, 1828) into what it is today. In fact, it could be argued that liberal arts colleges, with their liberal education core and foundational intents and outcomes (e.g., critical thinking, writing, and speaking; inclusive excellence; interpersonal and knowledge-based adeptness and flexibility) serve as immunity for graduates to minor and even major fluctuations in the post-graduation market (e.g., moving from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy at the end of the last century). It is because they offer necessary education to students for lifelong skills that they are so appealing and resilient.

Another reason for the inaccurate predictions is that a liberal education has served as a foil for a narrow view of the outcomes of an undergraduate education. For example, six-month employment has been used as a type of outcome without taking into consideration job performance, long-term leadership potential, and job satisfaction. Getting a job six months after graduation is a very short-term outcome for a four-year education. In addition, ability to work with others, empathy, critical thinking, and the like are typically what employers most desire and are directly linked to the outcomes of a liberal education. This disconnect becomes even more pronounced when one considers that 47 percent of today's jobs will become moderately to significantly redefined in the next two decades due to computerization (Frey & Osborne, 2013). The jobs least at risk require employees who are adept at complex human interactions, ambiguity, flexibility, critical thinking, and systems thinking. Teaching these and related skills are what liberal arts colleges do best.

At the same time, liberal arts colleges cannot necessarily rest on past laurels and presumed resiliency. In fact, the most successful ones have understood that they need to evolve continuously, which raises the question: How can liberal arts colleges pivot again and demonstrate success in the current higher education climate and into the 2020s? I propose that there are seven points of focus that liberal arts colleges should attend to:

Define and celebrate the liberal education brand.

A significant challenge facing liberal arts colleges is how to define, brand, and educate the college-bound public and their parents about what "liberal arts" means (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2017; Greenberg, 2015). The words liberal and arts reflect notions and Latin roots from Ancient Greek

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Conquering the Fear of Authenticity

By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti, MS

I will never forget the time I hired a team of social media experts to provide professional development for my fellow faculty members at a small college. As they deftly covered how to best use Facebook, Twitter, and other social media to connect with students, they suggested that it was important for faculty members to share information about all areas of their lives: families, hobbies, pets, musical interests, triumphs, frustrations, and more. To do less was to risk being perceived as inauthentic, a sure turnoff for our then-Millennial students.

All around the room, you could see Gen X faculty members break out in a cold sweat.

Millennials, and now Gen Z students, have grown up with their lives on display. Some of it is voluntary, as when they share play-by-play views of their day through Instagram. Some of it is the climate in which they were raised, with a team of adults that included parents, teachers, doctors, coaches, and others knowing their talents, weaknesses, medical histories, and more. For these younger generations, failing to share one's complete background would seem artificial, unnatural, and, yes, inauthentic.

However, Gen X (and older generations) grew up in a completely different environment. As we entered the workplace, we were told to hide any tattoos and cover up any piercings that weren't the standard issue one hole in each earlobe. In some environments, we were told to remove any potentially controversial bumper stickers from our cars so as not to expose any political position or musical taste that might offend a boss or a client. Women, in particular, were encouraged to avoid putting photos of their families on their desks, lest they create the impression that they might have priorities that competed with work. Everyone was counseled to have a professional work face and to appear to be always available for additional work responsibilities. Especially for the cohort that graduated college into the recession of the 1990s, it seemed like a pretty good strategy.

That professional development, however, makes the idea of sharing the minutia of one's life a bit daunting. However, there are ways to share one's personal side with students without dying of exposure.

Practice "planned spontaneity."

Being authentic doesn't mean saying or sharing everything that happens or that comes into your mind. Decide each day on a personal-life anecdote that you would be comfortable sharing, especially when talking to your students, and use that story as a way to connect. By deciding in advance, you maintain control over how much of your personal life you share, and your students get a glimpse into your real life.

Choose your office artifacts carefully.

Gone are the days when family photos are verboten, but that doesn't mean that your office has to be a complete exposition of the most intimate parts of your life. While you may not wish to display political paraphernalia, today it is perfectly acceptable to have souvenirs from your favorite band, a cherished hobby, or a significant life event in your office.

Share your real feelings about your discipline in class.

Students want to know more about their professors, and one of the easiest things for professors to share is their real feelings about their subject matter. If there is a section that you found difficult to understand the first time out or that you still struggle with, tell your students. This little bit of authenticity goes a long way toward letting students know that their own feelings of confusion are not abnormal. It is an added bonus if you can explain what made you like or understand the material at hand, even if this was not the case when you first encountered it.

Meet your students where they are.

Sometimes the best way to spark an authentic interaction with your students is not sharing pieces of your own life but sharing pieces of theirs. Ask about what television shows, music, or books your students are consuming, and then partake of them as well. Your authentic moments can be fueled by expressing interest in their passions without exposing your own.

Keep some things to yourself.

Younger generations may feel comfortable sharing most of their lives with their friends, but there is no reason you should feel compelled to do the same. In fact, there are many reasons one might wish to keep details of family life or political opinions to oneself while in the classroom. Never feel pressured to reveal more of your private life than you are comfortable with.

I was one of those faculty members sweating bullets when our consultants urged authenticity. However, with a little advanced planning, I have been able to share parts of my life with my students without feeling unduly exposed. You can too.

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The Associate Professor Chair: Making Progress to Full Rank

By N. Douglas Lees, PhD

Among the top 10 stressors in a national survey of academic chairpersons (Gmelch et al., 2017) are too little time for research/scholarship and excessive workloads. These related issues are likely in play at most colleges and universities, with the exception of top tier research universities and elite liberal arts colleges. Faculty members who have ventured into chair positions at all but the top tier institutions will tell you they sacrificed much for the opportunity to lead, and what was sacrificed was primarily their scholarly work and, to a lesser degree, their teaching—the two activities that likely attracted them to the academy.

Although the rewards of successful service as chair are gratifying, reality strikes home in two ways. The first is that about half of current chairs plan to serve a defined time and then return to the faculty. At institutions where research is an expectation, the question is, have they kept their scholarship alive and can they resume their work upon assuming the faculty member role? If teaching is the primary faculty role, the question is, have they kept up with and have they implemented "modern" pedagogies or taught online while serving as chair? I have explored the situation of the returning chair, without the complication of rank, in my recent work (Lees, 2015).

The second challenging scenario takes place when the chair is less than full rank. Associate professor chairs are a growing occurrence at colleges and universities, with only 59 percent of chairs holding full rank in 2016 (Gmelch et al., 2017). The question here is, can they achieve full rank or even make progress toward full rank while serving as chair? There have been successful applications for full rank among associate professor chairs, but the pathways to success are often ambiguous and fraught with difficulty.

In 2013, a question was raised on the listserv of the Council of Colleges of Arts & Sciences as to whether anyone had promotion policies for chairs who were less than full rank. The group asking the question had concerns regarding the equity of such chairs being judged for promotion by the same criteria as other candidates who had no administrative responsibility. The responses were uniform in their position that all candidates for promotion were treated the same way (the same criteria, standard, and review process) but differed in how administrative work as chair was taken into account, with a strong majority counting it under service, a few counting it under teaching, and one stating that it does not count. The survey did not reveal the basic requirements for promotion (how many areas of excellence), whether scholarship was required in more than one area, and whether administrative work was ever a significant part of an area of excellence.

Concerns regarding chair productivity and the challenges of meeting the measure for promotion to full rank while chair are rarely encountered at major research universities and elite liberal arts colleges. The main reasons for this are resources and culture. Major research universities and top liberal arts colleges have gained their stature through excellence that begins with their faculty. There is no paucity of full rank faculty on their rosters. Thus, there is no reason to consider less than full rank faculty for chair positions. If there are no interested internal professors, they have adequate resources to conduct an open search and attract a high-caliber candidate. Some institutions will launch an open search even when they have strong internal candidates in the hopes of adding a new external influence and/or innovation to the current mix of faculty expertise.

What allows chairs at these top institutions to remain highly productive in their scholarship? First, they have been selected as highly productive people with a strong scholarship drive. In some departments, chairs are expected to perform at the highest level of their department peers. To accomplish this, major resources must be available. Many of the routine activities that chairs are assigned are handled, through delegation, by abundant (relatively speaking) staff and other faculty (associate and assistant chairs). The chairs are also savvy at negotiating start-up packages that contain sufficient resources for continued productivity. Using the life sciences as an example, this would include dollars for supplies, instrumentation, conference travel, publication costs, and personnel. Of particular importance is a salary line for a senior research scientist who will run much of the day-to-day work in the laboratory. It is not uncommon for new chairs in medical schools to negotiate new faculty lines that can be filled in areas related to the chair's research, thereby potentially expanding the breadth and depth of the chair's research through collaboration. These significant resources allow the chair to focus on the most critical elements of chair work and on laboratory oversight and the earning/renewing of external funding.

Obviously, most institutions do not have the resources to support chair productivity in this way. However, there are some concepts in this scenario that, when combined with other ideas,

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might be helpful to chairs at Ordinary University (OU) and Vanilla College (VC) in keeping their scholarship alive. Setting the scene at OU and VC: OU has a research expectation for faculty advancement. Chairs receive a 50 percent teaching load reduction in exchange for administrative work that includes the typical responsibilities plus operating programs to enhance student retention. The life sciences department has a modest staff-to-faculty ratio of 1 to 3. Vanilla College has been primarily teaching-focused but with growing scholarship expectations for tenure and promotion. Chairs receive a 33 percent reduction in teaching load to meet the standard chair expectations but must also take on the new responsibility to mentor faculty in their scholarship efforts to meet the emerging expectations. Vanilla College life sciences also has a modest staff-to-faculty ratio. Both institutions are about to welcome new internal chairs who are ambitious, productive associate professors and wish to be promoted within the next few years.

So what steps should the associate professor chair take to enhance the chances of making progress toward promotion to full rank? The first two were discussed previously (Lees, 2015) in the context of a chair retuning to the faculty fully prepared to be competitive. They are identify a collaborator and arrange for resources before or during your chair appointment. Research collaboration has become commonplace, so there is no problem in fully valuing the shared products. The splitting of the responsibilities is key to chair success. If the scholarship is in teaching, the collaboration would be with a master teacher who can mentor the chair in the latest pedagogies. In both cases the chair should be able to collect preliminary data for external proposals and publications.

The resource issue is best negotiated with the dean before or early in the time of service as chair. As a productive researcher, the chair of life sciences at OU has external funding for research at the time of appointment (less likely for the VC chair), but should there be a gap in funding, the dean would bridge the chair to the next grant. If at the end of service the case for promotion is not ready, the fund plus some released time or a one-semester sabbatical would provide the resources to fully pursue scholarship and ease the chairs at OU and VC back into life as faculty members.

Beyond these two recommendations, several others are appropriate for associate professor chairs:

- Manage time carefully. Do the things you must do but be selective about the things you might do. Delegate routine chair work to staff, faculty members who need a change but want to continue to contribute, faculty committees, and a potential successor. Set aside 20 percent of your work week for your scholarship; be unyielding in protecting it. Some of these strategies will need to be discussed with the dean and the faculty. They should be supportive because faculty advancement is in everyone's best interests.
- Identify a mentor(s). Seek out those on campus who were promoted while holding administrative posts. Examine their dossiers to learn what substitutions were allowed, how they were explained, and how administrative work was utilized. It is unlikely that a chair is going to be as productive in terms of the standard products of scholarship as an equally talented faculty member who has no administrative responsibilities. Thus, working with others who have found paths to success can be very helpful.
- Take your good work to the next level. Talented and engaged chairs who have developed innovative strategies for fostering change, generating buy-in for course assessment, evaluating staff, and the like should share their successes with others through conference presentations. The visibility can lead to invitations to speak on other campuses, give conference keynotes, and submit articles for publication. This type of contribution is well received by novice chairs who rarely receive formal professional development for their roles, so it has a very practical application. It would be interesting to see how promotion committees would respond to a dossier that has a dozen conference presentations, three invited workshops, and several published articles and book chapters as part of the service section.

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Next Month's Topics

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and Roman times. "Liberal" refers to freedom, including freedom of thought and how to be a citizen in a free society. "Arts" has evolved to refer to study in the humanities (e.g., literature, music, philosophy); social sciences (e.g., psychology), natural sciences (e.g., biology); physical sciences (e.g., astronomy); and mathematics. The idea is that intentional and broad study in these "arts" leads to graduates who think and act more complexly in our diverse society. A challenge in today's society is that both words, liberal and arts, conjure definitions that are not consistent with their original or current use (i.e., liberal as in politically and arts as in fine arts only). To that end, liberal arts colleges will need to assist the public in a concerted and possibly collaborative effort on what a liberal education means and how it differentiates from other educational systems (e.g., learning for life and lifelong employment vs. learning for a single job that may not exist in the future). Liberal education is more akin to Apple's Think Different than to Zune's Beam Your Beats advertising campaigns.

Moreover, branding has to highlight how liberal education forms the foundational skills that are needed for innovation and entrepreneurship and that a hallmark of liberal arts colleges is an engaged faculty who deeply care about teaching. Finally, liberal arts colleges must continue to highlight how their students, armed with a liberal education, are in the best position to survive future changes in the job market and become, as Joseph Aoun puts it, robot-proof (Aoun, 2017).

Embrace and champion the richness of diversity and inclusive excellence.

Liberal arts colleges are primed to respond to the changing demographics in the United States, combined with the need for global citizens. After all, inclusive excellence and the ability to reach across interpersonal and intercultural boundaries are hallmarks of liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges have been successful at going beyond the surface of diversity that may be reflected in website images to core educational approaches that integrate diversity across multiple realms in a deep manner. Liberal arts colleges are also traditionally more flexible, nimble, and adaptive than their land-grant counterparts.

Demonstrate financial stewardship.

A challenge for many liberal arts colleges is developing fiscal models that ensure long-term financial stability and success. In the present higher education environment, where tuition discounts are not in sync with inflation and income, it is critically important to continue to examine and build financial structures that counter the sole reliance on tuition. Moody's Investors Service has cautioned small colleges about what could happen if they become inflexibly tuition dependent (Moody's Investors Service, 2015). At the same time, it has provided guidance on how to remain successful, including intentional financial planning and structures that include alternative revenue streams (e.g., auxiliary facilities; donor gifts, contracts, and grants).

Attend to enrollment management.

The need for a sophisticated and integrated enrollment management system cannot be underestimated. Best practices in enrollment management attends to the entire student life cycle (e.g., brand, recruitment, admissions, student serves, alumni). As an example, the recruitment of prospective students alone involves multiple interrelated approaches such as online advertising, geo-fencing, high school pipelines (e.g., adopt-a-school), regional and international outreach, and social media. Data-informed decision making must permeate the entire process from admissions and the deployment student services. Finally, the enrollment management operations must be seamless and intentionally lead to alumni engagement.

Focus on fundraising.

As an extension of enrollment management, alumni engagement must be sophisticated and keep pace with emerging technologies. Alumni engagement is a key opportunity for donor gifts. In addition, a liberal arts college must actively diversify its donor base and consider business and community organizations that are not necessarily tied to alumni. Student and faculty stories that come out of liberal arts colleges are compelling and are made for donor appreciation. Sophisticated fund-raising campaigns can lead to gifts from multiple friends of a college.

Pursue teaching and learning that is technologically enhanced.

The practice of teaching at a liberal arts college has as its roots the use of the Socratic method. Although the Socratic method is not used as a sole method of teaching, it does inform the primary goals of liberal education, which are to develop students who can think, write, and speak critically. Over time, technology has been able to supplement (not supplant) teaching, and it behooves educators to continue to examine the extent to which new technologies (e.g., augmented reality, virtual reality, and blended learning) may enhance teaching and student learning. A critical condition of specific technology use is that it must indeed demonstrate enhanced teaching and learning; otherwise, it should not be used. Liberal arts colleges do not need to be filled with Zunes.

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Follow the best leader.

Liberal arts colleges must seek out leaders who can lead the aforementioned best practice areas and have the skills to steer a large ship forward into a future of many unchartered waters. The president is the focal point and model of campus leadership and can serve a critical role in developing and inspiring multiple leaders throughout the college. Liberal arts colleges would do well to hire leaders who can convey a leadership approach that reflects collaboration, relationship building, listening, diversity and inclusive excellence, flexibility, innovation, entrepreneurship, and a broad view of the current and future higher educational landscape. To be sure, finding this type of leader is a tall order. That said, the successful future of any liberal arts college depends on it.

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With so many colleges and universities feeling the bitter cold of hiring freezes and frozen budgets, they must turn to their own internal resources. So the question is: Who are your unicorns on-campus? Where do they live? Every campus is different, but odds are you will find them in one of these areas: institutional research, institutional effectiveness, or information technology.

Historically, there has been overlap in these three areas, so one question to consider is do they play well in the sandbox together? At many institutions, they do. But when areas overlap, sometimes toes are stepped on, so you need to be conscious of the dynamic between these three groups when requesting assistance from one or all of them. You also may find unicorns outside of these traditional areas; maybe it's someone in the registrar's office . . . or financial aid . . . maybe it's someone in student affairs or someone in your fund-raising division. They are truly diamonds in the rough and worth seeking out.

These unicorns will help you drive the much-needed change in a data-informed culture, a world that relies more on facts and less on intuition, experience, or anecdotes. They will help you establish one centralized source of truth, turning data into information and institutional knowledge through analysis and interpretation. They will help you build relationships across departments, educating colleagues about the value of data and the importance of reporting on outcomes that are life-changing to your students, faculty, and staff. They will help you find the difference that makes a difference.

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Thoughts on the Amenities Arms Race: A College Conundrum

By Thomas R. McDaniel, PhD

College amenities have long been a topic of concern for college administrators as well as students and parents. What should college and university administrators know about such concerns as they examine policies and practices in their own institutions? Here are a few questions for academic leaders and some thoughts about possible answers:

Are more elegant amenities the best way to attract today's new college students?

For those of us who were in college in the good old days of the 1960s, today's emphasis on amenities—such as student activity centers, luxurious meeting spaces for students, several dining room options, climbing walls, fitness centers, and dorm rooms with big screen televisions—may seem more country club than college campus. But such amenities have been rapidly built since the turn of the new century and sold to college boards and administrators as the best way to attract students who seem more interested in luxury than learning.

Indeed, research studies tell us that colleges known for academic excellence are less likely to spend on amenities than on educational quality. For less selective colleges it is easier to construct new buildings than to improve academics, which takes longer and is less visible to parents and applicants. Some critics even accuse college presidents of having an "edifice complex." Expanded athletic facilities may be a case in point. A 2015 study at the University of Michigan found that "lower-tier colleges have a greater incentive to focus on consumption amenities" because their applicants may care more about the "resort experience" and athletic facilities than academics.

But should attracting more students take precedence over improving academic quality?

That is an important question with no easy answer. Perhaps the obvious response is simply why choose? Colleges should do those things that both attract students (including amenities) and enhance their learning strategies and intellectual skills. Those who are on the academic side of the campus dynamic can make sure they advocate for faculty salaries that will attract the best available candidates while doing all in their power to strengthen the curriculum so that students will develop critical-thinking abilities and academic knowledge of the highest quality possible.

They can also do a better job of connecting and selling academics and career preparation to prospective students. Those on the student life side of the dynamic will no doubt continue to argue for the best possible amenities, athletics, and student services, as they should. Both sides will demand that presidents and boards take their needs and arguments seriously as they compete and cooperate in building effective college policies and practices. This is college politics 101!

What does the future look like for most institutions?

It appears that colleges are entering a new era in which declining student enrollments and rising costs are colliding. It is well known that college tuition is rising twice as fast as the cost of living (7 percent versus 3.2 percent) with student debt now exceeding all credit card debt in the nation. Much of that tuition increase seems to result from administrative bloat (ouch!). And the challenge of student debt and college cost—at least some of which is created by the amenities race—is one reason student enrollment numbers have been stagnant or declining.

This situation has given rise to the surge in enrollments in less expensive and less luxurious two-year community colleges and the advent of more online institutions: The University of Phoenix, one such online behemoth, enrolls more students than any other institution in the country. Prestige institutions—think the Ivy League—will continue to thrive in the years ahead, but state institutions and small liberal arts colleges in particular will face ongoing enrollment challenges that will require innovative thinking about both student services and academic programs. In a 2015 *Odyssey* article, Aiden Kocarek suggested, surely facetiously, the "5 Things Every College Campus Needs": moving walkways, heated pavement, massage chairs, Starbucks vending machines, and phone charging stations. That may be over the top on the amenities front, but those of us from the 1960s college experience never dreamed there would be climbing walls or private bathrooms in residence halls!

A Final Thought

These three questions are central to how colleges and universities will debate directions in the challenging future. I am retired now from one of those fine small liberal arts colleges that are in the crosshairs of this conundrum, but be assured that I will continue to watch this dynamic play out as my colleagues look for the very best balance between great student services (including amenities) and a challenging academic program.

Thomas McDaniel is professor of education emeritus and a former administrator at Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. ▼