

High Schools Adjust Strategies to Meet Higher Education's Growing Challenges

This past spring, college-bound high school seniors were undoubtedly elated to [learn](#) where they will attend college in the fall. But, will the next cohort, the class of 2024, experience that same excitement? The forecast looks cloudy.

News headlines are calling attention to a growing higher education crisis characterized by enrollment declines and financial strain. Two articles released in January 2019 demonstrate this: "Vermont's Green Mountain College to close – and more are on the rocks," and "Freshman applications dip at UC for the first time in 15 years. Is it the start of a trend?" A month later, "At region's smallest colleges, poor graduation rates threaten their financial stability," spotlighted the demise of small private colleges. Mergers and [closures](#) are becoming common and colleges in New York haven't been immune. An online publication [tracks](#) mergers, consolidations and closures that have occurred since 2016 and about 11 New York schools are on the list. Several colleges in nearby Vermont also appear on the list.

HIGHER EDUCATION'S OUTLOOK

- ▶ **Higher education's challenges**
Challenges include low graduation rates, insufficient endowments, skepticism about the need for higher education, and birth rate trends.
- ▶ **Higher education's possible solutions to challenges**
Solutions include a shift to more online education, experiential learning, co-op programs and reinventing the liberal arts.
- ▶ **Ensuring smooth K-12 to higher education transitions**
Practices include using a personalized approach to college guidance, ensuring greater communication between K-12 and higher education administrators, implementing bridge programs, obtaining more funding for college visits, helping students of color work through possible stressors like microaggressions and using Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).
- ▶ **Warning signs of possible college closures and/or reconfigurations.**
Possible warning signs include low graduation rates, declining enrollment and a lack of innovative learning methods like [online programs](#).

Higher Education's Growing Problems and K-12's Response

To date, any recent closures of Vermont colleges like Green Mountain College have not raised concerns among superintendents or school board members, according to the Vermont Superintendents Association and the Vermont School Boards Association.

In New York, a deal between The College of New Rochelle (CNR), set to close after this summer, and Mercy College may well act as a buffer to mitigate any upheaval the closure may have on students, according to Francis X. Curley, interim director of guidance at the New Rochelle City School District, which is in close proximity to the college. This collaboration enables CNR students to enroll at nearby Mercy College, so the demise of CNR "has not been as difficult as anticipated," Curley told NYSSBA. At neighboring Pelham Union Free School District, CNR was a suitable fit for the district's students who wanted to pursue a nursing career, but since 2004 only a handful of students enrolled at the college, says

Eugene Farrell, director of counseling services for the district. And, at neighboring Bronxville Union Free School District, students don't often opt to attend college in the local community, Dr. Roy Montesano, superintendent of schools, told NYSSBA.

While closures, mergers and consolidations may not be of pressing concern, it is imperative that schools understand what puts a college or university at risk. With that in mind, high schools can better guide students toward sustainable institutions.

Low graduation rates may indicate that a small college is struggling. When considering "the 86 smallest, private four-year colleges in New England, 42 have a six-year graduation rate under 60%, the national average for four-year schools," states a [Boston Globe](#) article. High tuition prices may add to this problem because they saddle students with debt they can't pay off, according to the article. Some colleges loosen admissions requirements to increase enrollment, but then students are not equipped to handle course material.





Declining enrollment amplifies a struggling college's challenges. During the past decade, about 50 colleges have tinkered with tuition to jumpstart enrollment, but **tuition** reprieves do not drastically improve enrollment, says EAB, an educational best practices organization. Other reasons for low enrollment might be:

- The "public **questioning** of the value of a college degree."
- A decline in **birth rates**.
- The option to attend **community college** and gain technical skills.
- "The deterrent of newly restrictive federal immigration policies," **according to** the University of California System's director of admissions.
- Generation Z's interest in becoming **social media influencers**.¹
- A strong **economy**.

up their enrollment campaigns in light of the scholarship to attract students. To date, the influence of this scholarship is unclear.

How High Schools Navigate these Challenges

As higher education institutions look for ways to remain relevant like offering **online education, digital credentials** and **co-op** programs like the one at **Northeastern University**, high schools need to prepare students for these changes. The City University of New York also prioritizes experiential learning in response to Governor Andrew Cuomo's 2015 vision statement that students "'demonstrate work readiness and prior relevant experience to prospective employers.'"

Some liberal arts colleges are reinventing their entire model. Hiram College introduced "**The New Liberal Arts**." The curriculum includes a mix of liberal arts and

college guidance is necessary. For example, Glen Cove students need to know about **Educational Opportunity Programs**.

What is needed between school counselors and higher education administrators is greater communication, Alomia says, since contact primarily consists of college career fairs. She maintains a contact list of representatives at upstate colleges and universities, but it does not substitute for college visits. Prior to budget cuts, Glen Cove took students to visit college campuses.

New Rochelle Public Schools also invests in ways to ensure students have a seamless transition to college. The school district has a bridge program with Westchester Community College which familiarizes students to college life, including tours and college preparatory classes so students don't need remedial classes once they get to college, says Curley. And, counselors at Pelham Memorial High School track trends regarding higher education challenges like fiscal and enrollment problems at **Sweet Briar** and fiscal problems at **Hampshire**, notes Farrell. When the counseling department communicates with colleges, endowment and financial issues are talked about, he told NYSSBA.

There are also other stressors that may thwart college completion for students. Dr. Ian Levy, VP Counselor Educators for the New York State School Counselor Association, says the transition to college from high school can be especially difficult for students of color at predominantly white institutions (**PWIs**) since there are "significant issues in retention rates as a result of racial stress/microaggressions." Levy says school counselors should talk to students about these possible challenges so they do not wind up thwarting college completion.

Brian Kesel, Executive Director of the New York State Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, thinks professional learning communities (PLCs) and consensus about formative assessments can help bridge the divide between K-12 and higher learning.

High school's role in higher ed challenges

Enrollment, retention and fiscal challenges are affecting many higher education institutions. High schools can help offset these challenges so that college-bound students find the best learning environment upon high school graduation.

Another measure of a college's strength is its endowment. Financially secure colleges are able "to fund at least **30%** of their operating revenue with investment income from their endowments." Hamilton College (33.3 %) and The Juilliard School (46.3%) are two New York colleges that exceed this benchmark.

New York's new **Excelsior** Scholarship may contribute to the challenges smaller schools face. The Excelsior Scholarship provides financially eligible New York students a tuition-free education at SUNY and CUNY universities. Some college administrators say this pits private colleges against public universities, while others don't want to discuss what may seem to be a political hot potato since the scholarship provides educational access to students. Some private New York schools like **Le Moyne** College are ramping

civic-oriented work with a focus on interdisciplinary thinking; one program provides students with hiking boots and a mobile gadget to communicate and collaborate anywhere.

These strategic decisions mean public schools need to put practices in place to ensure a smooth transition from K-12 to college. Jeanette Alomia, a school counselor at Glen Cove High School in Nassau County, has some ideas. Alomia, who is one of two bilingual Spanish-speaking counselors at the high school, thinks a cookie-cutter approach to counseling does not work. Glen Cove, she says, is underfunded and more diverse than some of the other nearby districts. There are plenty of first-generation students and students who may not go on to a four-year school in the district, according to her, so a personalized approach to

¹ According to a March 2019 Wired article, while leaving college to pursue a career as a social media influencer is gaining traction, colleges are very interested in attracting students with social media savvy to aid recruitment efforts.