

OP-ED

# *Delusions, demographics, and denial: higher education's future in Ky and elsewhere / Opinion*

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Higher education has been facing a demographic cliff for a while, but has not addressed it properly.  
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It doesn't take a genius to see that everything is not quite right in higher education these days. The feeling that things can't go on as they have in the past is slowly sinking in for those associated with our colleges and universities. A day of reckoning is coming.

As most college students can attest, the cost of attending college continues to escalate exponentially while the return on that investment is increasingly suspect. The average student loan debt incurred per student is around \$38,000, while the average annual salary a newly

minted college graduate in Kentucky can expect to earn is roughly the same amount. Let that sink in for a moment.

A little historical context might be appropriate here. In 1973, about 47 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college after graduation. Fifty years later, that percentage has risen to around 62 percent. But the number of high school students is constantly fluctuating. After peaking at around 4 million in 2025, the number of high school graduates across the country is expected to decrease significantly over the next dozen years.

Family size has been steadily decreasing as a direct result of the economic trauma we experienced in 2008; fewer children mean fewer high school graduates, which has implications for higher education enrollments. In fact, the trend will continue through 2037, when the number of graduates is expected to be around 3.5 million, roughly the same as 2014.

Academic leaders have known the bottom was going to drop out for quite some time. What has been their response? In many institutions, the correct answer would be virtually nothing. Or worse, complete denial. Instead of diligently preparing for an entirely predictable demographic downturn, many in key decision-making positions have continued to champion the “more is better” mantra that may well serve as the epithet for many colleges and universities.

The inevitable consequences of this failure to take the coming tectonic shift seriously — and develop more sustainable enrollment management strategies — are already being manifested in a variety of ways throughout the industry. In an age that demands cooperation and collaboration, our colleges and universities are increasingly competing for a shrinking pool of potential students; in essence, shooting themselves in the feet.

It is becoming readily apparent to everyone except those whose livelihoods are directly tied to the enterprise that we have too many colleges and universities. Moreover, each institution wants to have all the programs, all the amenities, all the luxuries. Which would be great if supply matched demand. Unfortunately, there are just not enough students to fill the seats (and the beds).

This has been true for quite some time, but the precipitous drop in high school graduates we are about to experience has only exacerbated the situation. An attitude of “if we build it they will come” has characterized higher education for far too long; an unavoidable course correction is looming. And most likely it will inflict a lot of pain before a more manageable equilibrium is restored.

For example, there could come a time when public post-secondary institutions are subjected to the same state regulatory constraints as their counterparts in elementary and secondary schools. Instead of having independence from managerial oversight, administrators increasingly see faculty as hired staff. They are simply paying people to do a job they have created and defined. As such, they expect them to do what they want, how they want, and when they want.

Under this system, “academic freedom,” once a cornerstone of higher education — and held as sacred by many faculty — is diminished to the point of being nonexistent.

Name another venture in which the service providers are given consequential control over the operation they are facilitating. The surgeon has full control of your hip replacement, but doesn't get to dictate payment arrangements. There are typically a lot of other people being paid salaries to execute the billing process. In essence, this is why healthcare costs are

escalating exponentially, and — more to the point at hand — why a college education has become one of the most expensive investments you can make these days.

Higher education administration is now a career path of choice for those who like to be in charge and build empires – without having to use their own money to achieve these ends. The current landscape is like real estate; i.e., building hotels or amusement parks. But the party may be ending abruptly for those who have benefited most from the “business as usual” attitude that seems to permeate the contemporary academic mindset.

Our vision of the future — which is already showing signs of happening — is that state departments of education will ultimately step in and regulate higher education in the same way they control high schools. They will begin by consolidating the public institutions; close two or three in order to increase enrollment at the remaining open institutions. No longer will all campuses get to offer all programs. Degrees and other credentials will be provided based on supply and demand.

The private sector is used to this, and the reality is that it works. If you provide a product or a service for which you have too few customers, it’s not rock science to predict how it will play out. If you are thinking about opening a franchise, it’s always a good idea to check the local market. You don’t want to open more shops before you know if you are going to have enough shoppers.

Think about it. If a high school coach can’t teach, then he/she can’t coach. Eventually college faculty will be more like high school teachers; they will do it for the sheer joy of teaching, the pure pleasure of conducting research. Higher education will no longer serves as the welfare to work program for the highly educated.

Honestly, things in the academy have been out of balance and moving in the wrong direction for quite some time. We can either implement our own course correction, or we can have one imposed from the outside. It’s really our choice. The sooner we take the writing on the wall to heart, the better off we’ll all be.

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