Those in higher education have been aware of the looming “demographic cliff” facing campuses across the US since at least 2018, when Nathan Grawe published *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*. Grawe used data from the Higher Education Demand Index to demonstrate that by 2026, there will be a substantial decrease in the college-going population, particularly from certain geographic regions that have traditionally fed small liberal arts colleges and from populations with a higher ability to pay for college.

The impact of a declining US birthrate will ripple throughout all aspects of higher education, affecting students and their families, faculty and staff, campus finances and infrastructure, and even local communities and industry. Long
before July 2019, when I arrived at Allegheny College, the college had seen the writing on the wall from its own diminishing enrollment data. It proactively moved to resize the institution, reducing the size of the student body to maintain selectivity and continue to attract the open-minded, high-quality student most appropriate for our rigorous curriculum. Allegheny College also put in place strategic initiatives intended to balance the college’s budget and steer the college toward a more strategic future, before the arrival of the demographic cliff in 2026.

This anticipatory, clear-eyed, and nimble thinking presents a model for the approach higher education institutions will need to adopt if they want to not only survive the looming demographic cliff but also stay ahead of future challenges.

**Education for a complex world**

As an interdisciplinary scholar of Renaissance art and literature, I have been trained—like the artists and humanists I study—to see the world through multiple lenses, to approach complex issues from different angles. I was drawn to Allegheny College by my sense that the college had a distinct story to tell, which it had not yet fully managed to articulate. This college, founded in 1815 and located in rural northwest Pennsylvania, offers the precise type of multidisciplinary education our research shows this generation of students is seeking. I found in Allegheny College’s curriculum and approach to personalized preparation for life, that very Renaissance essence of interdisciplinarity, of learning to see the world through different lenses. I ultimately saw a Gen Z twist on Renaissance ideals: the desire for an education that prepares a person to be more than just one thing, more than just a major, more than just a job.

Unfortunately for me and all college and university presidents, the world has changed faster than even we had imagined it would. COVID-19 arrived and the required, all-consuming response to it initially upended all forward-thinking plans. While coronavirus planning and logistics swiftly became everyone’s focus, I gave my senior team one strong mandate: that we come out of this crisis a stronger version of the college than we went in. Like students drawn to Allegheny College, we have chosen to take our own interdisciplinary and broad “liberal arts” approach to solving our future challenges.

No one doubts that higher education faces a potentially dire future, with more questions than answers. The overlapping global challenges of a pandemic, racial reckoning, financial crisis, and political unrest have only sped up the approach of the looming demographic cliff. These issues have intensified uncertainty over the value proposition or return-on-investment of higher education and particularly that of small, private, residential liberal arts colleges. We know that not all of us will be on this journey 10, 20, or 50 years from now unless we take a thoughtful, strategic approach to ensure the viability and sustainability of our institutions.

Those of us who will be here will have found creative ways to demonstrate our value, relevance and even necessity for addressing the world’s challenges. Indeed, higher education institutions must begin to think and work differently, to define
themselves in new ways, to question their own existence and not be afraid of the answers that might be revealed. We owe it to the students we educate and graduate into the world, to model the agile, entrepreneurial mindset we ask them to take on.

**Build great, and Gen Z will come**
As Jim Collins (2001) writes, traditional businesses that have transformed themselves from good to great have done so by asking, “What can we potentially do better than any other company . . . ?” (97). The fortuitous answer to that question for Allegheny College and other select institutions of higher learning, is that we are focused on developing and offering the exact kind of academic and cocurricular formation that Gen Z has told us they want: to be valued for their individuality and to pursue an education that prepares them to think critically, communicate creatively, and question everything. Employers today are looking for the same kind of multidisciplinary and creative thinkers who can bring different perspectives to solve the intractable global issues facing us and who can use their broad, flexible, interdisciplinary liberal arts formation to shift their approaches to work as the world continues to change. Or as author David Epstein (2019) writes, “Everyone needs habits of mind that allow them to dance across disciplines” (49).

A common refrain in higher education right now is that we are educating students and preparing them for jobs that don’t currently exist. This is true. Fundamentally, Allegheny College knows that we are educating students who choose **Mind over Major**, who dance across disciplines, and who can interweave a major and a minor to create bridges to concepts, fields, and ideas that are not even on our radar today. To stay ahead of the looming demographic challenges, we must push ourselves to keep evolving, adapting, and proactively contributing to the conversation. And so Allegheny College is forging new initiatives to showcase to our local community the value of the broad liberal arts education we and others offer. These include creating structured pathways for our graduates to employment with local manufacturing, offering short-term retraining in the liberal arts for alumni and local workers, and recognizing that such an interdisciplinary formation is one that should be open to lifelong learners at different points in time.

**Change where you stand, change what you see**
For many historic institutions of higher learning that are into their second or third century of existence, the need to change can feel like an affront to traditional ways of thinking, learning, and teaching. Despite all the inventions, ideas, and fields that have emerged in higher education since the Middle Ages, in some ways our institutions are not radically changed from their predecessors of 800 or so years ago. But for institutions of higher education to remain relevant, they must adopt the broad, multidisciplinary thinking and creativity showcased by the great Renaissance thinkers, who were engineers and artists (Leonardo da Vinci); mathematicians and painters (Piero della Francesca); and architects, poets, and sculptors (Michelangelo), to name just a few. Those early innovators understood what we have somehow lost: new solutions arise from the ability to shift your perspective and see an issue through a different lens.
At Allegheny College, we have chosen to embrace both the spirit of what is old is new again and also the famous line in Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s The Leopard (1960): “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change” (40). We are building on our history and tradition while incorporating “new” Renaissance ideals that inspire our requirement that students have both a major and a minor, our “learning outside the lines” interdisciplinary approach, our encouragement to students to be someone and not something. The flip side of the quote from The Leopard is that institutions that do not change themselves will be changed by time and invention and will ultimately become less relevant. Higher education in general, and small liberal arts colleges in particular, must prove to the world that the young people we are educating and graduating are those who will forge a path forward for the world, who will be the adaptable, creative, new-idea thinkers with diverse and inclusive perspectives that employers and our world need. Only through such change can we continue to prove our relevance and value and can we be fully prepared for whatever cliffs, hurricanes, or as-yet-unknown global challenges are coming our way.

References

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