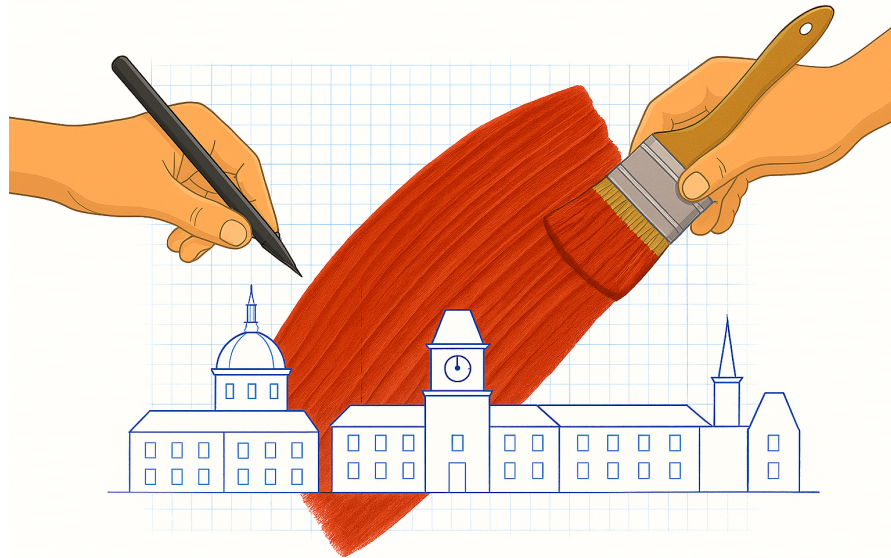


# Higher Ed's Broad Brush Dilemma

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## INTRODUCTION

We've all seen the headlines, read the stories, and witnessed the political theater challenging the value of higher education. At first glance, this backlash feels sudden – universities appear to be on their heels, losing ground and much of the support it had enjoyed historically. But was it really all that sudden? Evidence suggests otherwise. Confidence in higher education has eroded gradually over decades. Many would argue the softening of support, the questioning of higher ed's value, and the criticisms of academic institutions and their culture has become louder in the last decade, reaching a crescendo very recently with sharper accusations and sweeping demands for reform.

Higher ed is not monolithic. It's a vast and complex ecosystem where nuance matters. Yet, increasingly, the entire sector is being painted with a single, overly broad brush. This oversimplification undermines these institutions and weakens the social compact with the broader public that sustains them. Some of the broad strokes are deliberately crafted to advance political agendas. Others, however, emanate from missteps within the academy itself, moments when universities have appeared insular or unresponsive to public concerns. In effect, we have sometimes handed the critics the paintbrush and a large can of red paint and said, 'have at it,' allowing them to define the whole picture in the process.

It's easy to hear and become distracted by those critics. They dominate the conversation because they are loud, persistent, and adept at painting the bleakest possible picture of higher education with these broad-brush strokes. But what would a more deliberate, evidence-based perspective reveal instead? Imagine an

*artist-illustrator*, someone who works patiently and is more comfortable in using multiple brushes, colors, and mediums to create a richer, more refined and accurate image. The *artist-illustrator* is deliberate, patient, even slow and often iterative in drawing up their imagery and drawing out the viewer's reaction. They use hues, layering, and shading to create a more complex, more nuanced picture.

That is the approach policymakers need: one grounded in data, context, and long-term societal outcomes rather than reactionary strokes. Throughout the remainder of this discussion, we will use the *artist-illustrator* as a counterpoint to the critics' monochromatic and broad-brushed portrayal, urging leaders to see the full canvas before shaping policy, and the public to do the same before passing summary judgement.

## CRITICISMS REAL AND EXAGGERATED

Critics often cite three main failings: universities' perceived embrace of hyper-liberal agendas, their inability to control costs and administrative growth, and the practice of steering students toward majors with little or no prospects for employment. All of this is evidenced, critics assert, by the declining interest in higher education. Data-driven analyses have challenged each of these claims or at the very least provided important context. But, as is often the case, there are grains of truth underlying all those criticisms. Unfortunately, simply ignoring these sorts of partially accurate facts inevitably will run the risk of reinforcing the very narratives that threaten the sector's legitimacy.

Let's first unpack the assertion that university personnel embrace hyper-liberal agendas. There certainly is evidence that some faculty members push ideological agendas and encourage students to adopt those viewpoints, both inside and outside the classroom. Such agendas are nearly always extremely left leaning. This is not a debatable point. But, in and of itself, this fact alone is not a reason to dismiss all of academia. (Switching metaphors for a moment, this is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.) Importantly, the *artist-illustrator* can see the nuance here. When such ideologically driven efforts by faculty fall outside the scope of the courses they are teaching or the responsibilities they have as an advisor, mentor, or supervisor, of course the criticism (indeed the concern) is justified. This principle applies to any political position, left or right. Students should be exposed to multiple views and counterpoints; indeed, this is one of the most important roles colleges and universities play in fulfilling their educational mission.

But such exposure must be balanced, with the counterpoints coming from both sides (in favor and opposed), if students are to hone their critical (and independent) thinking skills and form their own opinions. Students must be taught and understand the importance of shaping their own opinions. After all, doing so is one of the rights and privileges we have in our country. Colleges and universities must eschew anything that even gives the appearance of students being told what to think. That's what happens in authoritarian regimes, not in a democracy.

While rarely in the majority, such ideologically driven faculty members unfortunately are often the most vocal, the most active among governance groups and unions, and the most likely to attract media attention. As a result, this small group often can exert an outsized influence on how the public perceives an institution, unwittingly fueling critics while at the same time damaging the institutions that employ them. In effect, they provide copious amounts of red paint for the broad brush-inclined critics/opponents who portray higher

education as ideologically extreme. For policymakers, this dynamic underscores the importance of supporting initiatives that promote viewpoint diversity and transparency, measures that strengthen trust without compromising academic freedom.

Claims of runaway costs (Kock and Cebula, 2020) and administrative bloat (Weinstein, 2023), the latter a popular trope among critics inside and outside institution, similarly have been debunked, at least for the most part. Here, too, there is some basis for the assertions, even if largely rooted in misunderstanding or incomplete information. But what does the *artist-illustrator* see? Yes, costs have risen faster than inflation over the years. But several structural factors help to explain this trend, including: (1) significant reductions in state support for public higher ed; (2) increased regulatory requirements and federal mandates for oversight, audit, and compliance, all of which require additional staff; and (3) increasing expectations for student support services (e.g., advising and career services, tutoring and academic support services, mental health services). These are not signs of waste; rather, they reflect investments in student success alongside compliance with legal obligations.

Despite rising costs, the reality is often misunderstood: the average net cost of attendance has *declined* over the last decade (Rosowsky, 2024a). Colleges and universities have made affordability a priority through measures such as reducing administrative positions and, in some cases, securing significant philanthropic support, making it possible for more families to afford a university education. Unfortunately, this story has not been told effectively. Confusion persists around terms like “net cost,” “published cost,” and “discount rate,” and critics dismiss such cost concessions by pointing to fees, books, dining, and housing expenses. This is an important point, but the data remain clear: the average net cost of attendance (including all non-tuition costs) has been decreasing. The *artist-illustrator* doesn’t paint over this inconvenient fact with a single stroke. Instead, with patience and palette, they reveal the layered reality that policymakers must consider before embracing simplistic narratives.

As to the accusation that colleges and universities are driving students into majors having poor post-graduation job prospects, this too is a trope, one built on extreme and isolated cases rather than upon representative data and complete information. But, here too, there may be some basis in fact (even if unintentional). Colleges and universities are complex institutions rooted in traditions and intellectual models dating back generations, if not centuries. Faculty are disciplinary specialists – hyper focused on their respective fields of inquiry – and are seeking to replace themselves with each passing generation. As some disciplines become less relevant and more arcane, they are kept alive only through the advocacy of these specialists. In recent decades, as pressure to demonstrate return on investment has intensified, faculty in these areas have been asked to demonstrate that their graduates can secure relevant employment upon graduation. Many such faculty have resisted, claiming it was either beneath their status or not their responsibility. More importantly, they had never been asked previously for such information and thus lacked the tools and wherewithal to respond effectively. Their reluctance, or inability, to provide answers has fueled an increasingly negative narrative.

Stories of graduates with six-figure debt working in fast food and PhDs driving for Uber took hold, even if they were outliers and rare. These anecdotes overshadowed a more nuanced reality: many of the most generous donors to universities majored in the humanities or social sciences. Again, in the absence of context or counternarrative, those sensationalistic examples have become hardened into functional truth over time,

eventually becoming widely accepted “facts” despite being entirely unrepresentative. The *artist-illustrator* would have revealed all this complexity along the way, showing that while some graduates from certain academic programs certainly have faced challenges, the broader picture includes many, many more alumni who have experienced lifelong benefits, civic engagement, and pathways toward important leadership positions (Gallup, 2023). For policymakers, this underscores the need for better data transparency and career readiness initiatives – not simplistic attacks on entire disciplines.

And those declining enrollments? Not so fast – bring in our friend, the *artist-illustrator*. A careful and data-informed look reveals a more nuanced story. With the latest fall enrollment numbers now known and reported, we again see the same pattern we’ve seen for the last few years: undergraduate enrollments are *up* (Nietzel, 2025) at most elite privates, public flagships, and land grant universities. Headlines in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and posts on university social media channels confirm this trend, and even statewide systems of higher education are celebrating record high enrollments (SUNY, 2025). The only category that saw measurable decline in new enrollments was the master’s degree (Mowreader, 2025), driven largely by the decline in international graduate students entering the U.S. this fall – an outcome linked to visa rejections and delays rather than declining domestic demand.

That said, we do believe that there are darkening clouds on the horizon. The demographic cliff, expected to hit starting around 2030, will reduce the number of high school graduates who typically enroll in college, especially in some of those regions that already are experiencing population declines (Kothari et al., 2025). Those institutions that currently are growing will be in the best shape to weather the coming storm, especially if they expand offerings to target learners other than recent high school graduates. For others, however, the coming enrollment cliff is likely to accelerate decisions around mergers or closures. The reality is clear: there simply are not enough students to keep every institution of higher education at their ideal enrollments under their current operational models. The *artist-illustrator* sees clearly that this is not a crisis of the present but a challenge of the future – one that demands new levels of organizational agility, responsive and responsible operational reforms, and proactive policy solutions.

Just as damaging as our society’s growing willingness to accept partial truths – or even outright falsehoods when they align with our views – is our penchant for pithy headlines, shock journalism, and the tendency to cancel rather than engage in real debate. At the end of the day, these behaviors reflect a kind of intellectual laziness. Related, and equally harmful, is the widespread tendency to paint higher education with a single, broad brush. This reductionist approach, whether for simplicity’s sake or due to basic lack of understanding, has had deleterious effects, eroding public trust and weakening those institutions that are designed to serve society. When higher education is flattened into caricature, the social compact that sustains it begins to fray.

This broad-brush phenomenon is the subject of this article. We write from our unique perspectives and nearly a century of combined university leadership experience. Our aim is two-fold: first, to provide insight and clarity, especially for those who do not fully understand the complexity of U.S. higher education; and second, to suggest corrective pathways that can lead to more productive and sustainable outcomes, thereby illuminating solutions capable of restoring confidence and garnering broader public support for higher education. The *artist-illustrator* will remind us from this point forward that nuance really does matter, and that only by seeing the full canvas can policymakers and the public make informed choices and decisions about the future of higher education.

## THE BROAD BRUSH PAINTERS

The phenomenon of painting only in broad strokes is not limited to any one group. There are many painters, and they are generally dipping their preferred (broad) brush into the same color paint: red. (Some might cynically point out that some within the institutions themselves are using some magical new kind of paint that makes things disappear, a nod to the ironic use of cancel culture that higher ed imposes on itself.) Painting in red is meant to send a warning, raises a flag, signals an alert, and even sounds an alarm. Red is alarmist (look!), critical (wrong!), and urgent (now!). Red is widely understood to mean NO or BAD or even worse, EVIL.

Regardless of color, use of a broad brush glosses over nuance, significant details, and discriminating facts. Broad strokes make it easy to offer simple explanations and simple solutions. But they also encourage simplistic reporting, shallow journalism, and oversimplified approaches to regulation, policy, and governance. This kind of simplicity is neither efficient nor effective, neither accurate nor fair. As noted before, it amounts to intellectual laziness.

The media (local, regional, and national) may be among the worst offenders. They need eyes on stories, clicks on links, and attention to paid advertisers, of course. So, they often eschew the patient work of the *artist-illustrator*, favoring the (far quicker) broad brush. While the very best publications and journalists place a high premium on details, context, accuracy, and balance, there are many more that do not. And, more than the other culprits, their work resonates, causing ripples of misinformation (or information without nuance or context) for use by other media outlets, pundits, and politicians. And it's what the broader public feeds upon, increasingly in fast-food form, whether it's ten-second commentaries on what used to be news program or click bait on a news feed or information aggregator (aggravator?) page. The average person gets their news online, often on their phone, and has become adept at screen skimming. In-depth reporting, careful analysis, and options analysis have little place in today's news-light diet. As a result, the broad brush trumps the *artist-illustrator* every single time, it would seem.

Politicians also favor simple explanations, broad brush strokes, and attention-grabbing soundbites. They, too, have their stakeholders and their agendas. Knowing this, universities and their leaders must do a much better job engaging regularly (and authentically) with political leaders and their staff. They must become allies rather than adversaries (or feedstock for adversaries). They must be compelled to gin up support, not antagonism among their constituents. This sort of strategic investment in relationship-building requires more than just sharing the facts; it requires associations to be based on mutual respect and understanding.

Higher ed, when it is properly positioned and reported, is an incredible asset to every community, region, and state. Taken together, higher ed stands both as a national strategic asset *and* a national treasure. Higher ed must be framed and understood by politicians for what it is: a political asset and not a political liability. We should be working with our political leaders at the local, state, and national levels to understand what our communities, our society, and the nation need from us. Equally important, we should be providing accurate, defensible information to our political leaders about how we are meeting those needs. This relationship should be cooperative not combative, creating resonance rather than resistance, amplifying rather than cancelling our respective efforts.

Industry has used its own brush on higher ed. It started a decade or more ago with “graduates aren’t coming to us properly prepared or trained with the skills we need.” This rhetoric evolved, perhaps aided by other criticisms, into “colleges are dedicating too much of the curriculum to subjects that don’t matter” and “coursework is no longer rigorous and advanced knowledge needed by employers is not grasped by graduation.” Despite these sentiments, due to mutual interests the relationships between universities and industry deepened over time, expanding beyond internships and co-ops to include industry-funded (and sometimes jointly conducted) research. In turn, the broad-brushed criticism expanded (legitimately) to include “the pace of research and innovation, discovery and disclosure at universities is too slow for us” and “the intellectual property policies are too restrictive for us.”

Today, for reasons not fully apparent (though one can speculate), the tech industry in particular has aligned itself with some of the other broad stroke critics who are painting higher ed so negatively. Many of the so-called “tech bros” are critical of higher ed’s value and even relevance (in its current incarnation). They are supporting alternatives to traditional higher ed and even the degree itself. As a result, they are beginning to find candidates for employment in their companies earlier and earlier, often providing them with training, employment, job security, and attractive career opportunities that don’t require a college degree.

Here, too, universities must take the lead in repairing or rebuilding altogether the relationship with industry, tech and otherwise. What is it that each industry needs most? How can that fit within their curricula and mission? How can they deliver the most valuable graduates while at the same time preparing those graduates for life-long learning, citizenship, and prosperity beyond that first job? In turn, how can industry be more supportive of higher ed, helping them to meet shared objectives in the face of increasingly constrained financial resources? How can the *university-industry partnership* be supercharged so that each realizes far greater value than either entity receives today? Industry will continue to focus on STEM majors, STEM jobs, and STEM careers. But more and more companies are coming to understand the importance of humanities and social sciences and want their employees to have benefitted from exposure to these domains of knowledge and scholarship as well. This is especially true today with the rapid emergence of **AI**.

Interestingly, not all the broad brushstrokes criticisms come from *outside* of academia. Whether through their own choice or in response to external pressures, higher education institutions also are advancing the “one bucket fits all” narrative, either way failing to recognize the resultant harm they may be causing to their institution and to higher ed more broadly. Unfortunately, there are many examples of institutions that have abandoned their original missions in hopes of duplicating strategies and outcomes of others to whom they aspire (or their leaders aspire), or in pursuit of elusive additional revenue with which to keep their institutions open. This has been referred to by Rosowsky (2025b) as the “homogenization of higher ed,” a phenomenon caused in no small part by USN&WR rankings. The flaws and folly of such rankings systems have been called many times over the years, but they persist. They must be considered a system that has been tried, tested, and failed. One shudders to think how much colleges and universities have invested financially in the quest for rankings. Despite the proliferation of rankings systems (most of which are produced by for-profit media), and the well-recognized flaws, and the real costs incurred (whether or not they are recognized or acknowledged), colleges and universities continue to participate, chase, and even attempt to game these rankings. For institutions with so many smart people, this is difficult to explain.

Higher education's professional organizations and associations also are increasingly using a broader brush to paint their members. In their quest for membership and inclusion, they seem less focused on any one segment of higher education and more intent on welcoming all paid entrants into their respective tents. The result, some attendees of more recent events hosted by these organizations and associations will tell you, are annual meetings and conferences that are less focused, less substantive, and less relevant to any one group.

The awkward, uncoordinated, and likely ineffective responses by higher ed institutions (whether individually or collectively) to the most recent round of criticisms, sweeping claims, and calls for drastic reform (including proposals for increased government oversight) reveal a fundamental lack of strategy by both institutions and their associations. An effective strategy is harder to craft for institutions that have strayed from their core mission and are unable to demonstrate excellence and impact in their new domains. Likewise, associations face a daunting challenge when they must represent and unify all segments of higher ed under a single strategic approach or message.

The media and higher ed are in strange cahoots. One is wielding the broad brush, while the other is handing over the paint, and sometimes even helping to smear it.

## THE MANY CANVASSES

Lest we, as authors, be accused of wielding the same broad brush in making this argument, it's worth looking more closely at *which parts* of higher ed are being painted this way, how that portrayal is manifesting and propagating, and the specific impacts. Indeed, there is no shortage of brush strokes (and ample red paint) to go around: faculty, faculty shared governance, administration, students, graduates, admissions, even athletics programs.

### Faculty and Faculty Shared Governance

**Faculty** often are branded as arrogant and disconnected, self-important and self-righteous, activists and agitators, possessing liberal agendas and using their classrooms to promote them. They eschew hierarchy, resist administration, rebel against senior leaders, disrupt and even defame their institutions. Or so the story goes. But this is only true for a (typically) small group of faculty members on any campus. Ironically, it is this same small group that seem intent on drawing attention to their behavior, thereby allowing these perceptions to be made, generalized, and advanced. This is the group that seems oblivious to airing its dysfunction publicly, whether it involves calls for more committees and deliberation, angry rhetoric and protests staged to capture outside attention, walk-outs, sit-ins, or symbolic no-confidence votes. Without an effective counternarrative, and given the attractiveness of such narratives and causes to the media, they take hold and become widely accepted as both accurate *and* representative (*e.g.*, of all faculty at all colleges and universities).

The *artist-illustrator* allows us to see a different picture of the faculty. In our experience, the majority of faculty members at the majority of higher ed institutions are: (1) focused on their teaching, research, scholarship, advising, mentoring, and (often) engagement and outreach efforts; (2) proud to be part of their institution's success and to contributing in positive ways to the serving their students and raising the reputation of their

college or university; and (3) unlikely to engage in disruptive behavior, organized or otherwise, having neither the time nor the interest. But their voices often go unheard, drowned out by the loud voices of the protests, the resistance, and raucous of the smaller group. Colleges and universities have struggled to give this majority voice. Higher ed is the only place where a vote of 99-1 is “no.”

However unrepresentative, this “angry minority” (Toor, 2025) nevertheless has become the representation of the university faculty in the eyes of the public. Whether these institutions can effectively change this perception is an open question. Their options: (1) find ways to elevate the voice of the majority of faculty, (2) passively diminish the voices of the loudest voices that are not representative of the broader faculty, or (3) actively marginalize those voices. The latter, of course, is the most antithetical to cherished systems of **shared governance** at our nation’s colleges and universities. It also places the leaders who would choose such an option at greatest risk.

Each of the authors, in our own positions and ways, have called for a *reframing* and *reaffirmation* of shared governance (Rosowsky, 2022). We do not advocate for its elimination or even diminishment. But the urgency facing higher ed today requires new speed of action, new willingness to make change, and a far more forward-leaning posture for our higher educational institutions. We advocate for change and reform not despite mission, or in opposition to mission, but precisely because of it. Only with such reforms can colleges and universities remain relevant, valued, and sustainable into the future. Faculty must move from protectors of “all that has been” to shapers of “all that can be,” defenders to all that was to architects of their institutions’ futures. If universities are to be the brilliant canvasses upon which the future is painted, then faculty are the many colors and different brushes. What’s needed now, is a much larger palette of ideas, a box of many sized brushes, and a canvas that is no longer constrained by the institutional frames of a previous era.

#### (All) The Other Canvasses

While **institutions** and **faculty** are most often (and erroneously) painted with a broad brush, whether by those having an external agenda or an internal one, broad strokes also have been used to paint other groups within higher education.

**Senior administrators** are painted (most often from within) as overpaid bureaucrats, as being disingenuous or even dishonest, as being solely financially motivated, insensitive to faculty and staff challenges or needs, and willing to kowtow to wealthy alumni donors or politicians. There no doubt are cases that substantiate such claims, but only a small number. Rather, the narrative persists as a way for those that resist hierarchy, direction, or (shudder) change to support their cause. Here again, the *artist-illustrator* paints a different, and far more accurate, picture. Most college and university senior leaders are: (a) paid a market wage; (b) are honest, ethical, and lead with integrity; (c) are not only financially motivated but are *held responsible* by their boards for being so; (d) go out of their way to listen to, hear from, respond to, engage with, seek feedback and input from faculty and staff; and (e) would never sacrifice their institutional mission, their strategic priorities, or personal integrity when engaging with donors, politicians, business leaders, parents, journalists, or anyone else.

The topic of administrative bloat, discussed earlier, is as much about senior administrators as it is about **other administrators** (*i.e.*, non-instructional staff). The *artist-illustrator* looks more closely to see the truth. Closer

examination reveals few institutions have expanded their senior administrative ranks in recent years; rather, the opposite is true. To achieve cost savings, they have collapsed positions into others, expanded portfolios of responsibility, and even outsourced where possible. Where positions were added, it was generally in response to federal requirements (*i.e.*, new and unfunded mandates). Where non-instructional staffing has unquestionably expanded in recent decades is in the non-executive administrative offices, *e.g.*, academic support services, student advising and career counseling, health services, mental health counseling, residence life, recreational sports, orientation and first-year programs, legal services, and offices serving various identify groups, veterans, off-campus and continuing education students, etc. While perhaps not federally mandated, these are nonetheless students' and parents' expectations today. But painting these administrative (non-instructional) positions as unnecessary luxuries, or frivolous uses of funds that could better be directed to the teaching faculty, misses the mark entirely. They are required for institutions to stay competitive in today's higher education market.

College **students** today are painted as being entitled, coddled, and empowered to exempt themselves from anything they don't want to do. This image stands in stark contrast to what most might want for our college students: that they be required to work hard to earn their achievements, challenged and even knocked down from time to time, and required to move out of their comfort zone. BROAD BRUSH ALERTS: (1) This stereotype does not accurately describe *all* students working toward their college degree. (2) To the extent that these perceptions hold any truth, they reflect behaviors that have been permitted, fostered, and sometimes even demanded by faculty, staff, and parents. If we want students to adopt different attitudes, priorities, and levels of commitment, we must first change our own expectations and behaviors.

College **graduates** are painted with different brushes depending on the generation. In the past, a college degree was widely recognized as a gateway to employment security, career advancement, and long-term prosperity. Recent graduates (*i.e.*, the college students from just a few years prior, see above) are being painted as being ill-prepared for the workforce, unready for real-world challenges, and destined to move back in with their parents. BROAD BRUSH ALERTS: (1) This stereotype does *not* accurately describe the majority of college graduates today. (2) If any of these statements have merit for some graduates, we again must ask the harder questions: Why? And who bears responsibility?

**Admissions** offices and their leaders are being painted from the outside as either too alumni-nepotistic or too diversity conscious, and from the inside as being too focused on achieving net tuition revenue goals or (shudder) playing to the rankings. They are accused of over-admitting in fields for which the value proposition is greater (*i.e.*, market prospects) and under-admitting in the "classical" fields, thereby accelerating their declining enrollments. The *artist-illustrator* surely would paint a different picture. Based on our experience at many leading universities, we can say unequivocally that none of these caricatures are accurate – except perhaps that enrollment management leaders and their admissions teams are working hard to achieve the many and often competing enrollment goals established by their institution's president and/or governing board. The unheralded heroes of any college or university, admissions officers (and enrollment management teams more broadly, *i.e.*, including those responsible for designing and implementing financial aid strategies to help an institution reach those oft-competing goals) deserve far better than the broad brush, red blotch treatment.

Even college **athletics** programs are being painted with an overly broad brush: They are seen as cash cows that are only now being forced to share enormous profits with those who generate them, the student-athletes. Coaches are thought to be paid obscene salaries and permitted to pay the same for their top assistants. And to support their habits, athletics departments are seen as drawing funds away from the university proper, whether philanthropic or actual undergraduate tuition dollars. As with the other canvasses, there may be kernels of truth to some of these claims, however there are also contextual justifications and market realities that must be acknowledged. That said, college athletics is a mess right now (McGurn, 2025). A system has been created that is costing institutions tens of millions of dollars a year. The total, when considering all universities, will be in the billions next year (Gee, 2025). The broad-brushing of this situation is especially unfortunate as many schools are struggling with the new financial realities of college athletics that mandate revenue sharing (Cox, 2025) with student-athletes and permit lucrative deals to attract star athletes away from other schools. Many have rightly recognized that we now exist in a period of transition, that the current situation cannot endure and that it must be viewed as a step toward a final, more sensible and more sustainable system for college athletics.

## **BIGGER PAINT BOX, FINER POINT BRUSHES**

We have argued that such broad-brush portrayals of higher education – both as a whole and in its individual components – have been deeply damaging both to the institutions and to higher ed’s relationship with the broader public. Lacking nuance, context, and depth of understanding (and often lacking even a factual basis) these lazy strokes do more than paint an inaccurate picture. They are unhealthy, unhelpful, and ultimately counterproductive.

The *artist-illustrator* shows us a different way to view, interpret, and describe the highly nuanced and certainly complex institution: the institution of higher education. There are no quick fixes for something as varied and multi-faceted as higher ed. Different institutions face different challenges, have different resources they can deploy, and operate under different constraints (though some may be self-imposed). A lazy swipe of a single broad brush will not lead to any solutions. The lack of nuance and inability to recognize/capture context is not helpful and offers no utility. We need what the *artist-illustrator* would suggest: patience, principle, and a rendering of the full picture of higher ed – layered, textured, shaded, and beautifully nuanced.

To get there, we need a bigger paint box, with many colors, shades, and even textures. And we need finer point brushes, those that are capable of accurately capturing complexity and nuance. We also need patience. Such painting is not quick and not easy. It requires time to focus, to really see, and to properly represent. And it requires a catalog to allow different types of institutions to be included *and* accurately represented.

Higher education itself must become comfortable with its differences. Institutions must stop doing two things: (1) trying to be all things to all people and allow – even celebrate – a diversity of institutional types, missions, roles, and definitions of impact; and (2) driving toward the same “institutional ideal” (or what rankings tell them to be).

This is heavy lift for college and university presidents who have been under pressure from boards and alumni, and in some cases from their states, to continue advancing toward the same generic goals of impact (and

success), all while managing increasing costs, decreasing public support, increasing competition for fewer (traditional) students, and declining perceived value of their product. The *governance triad* (board-president-faculty) must be mobilized and activated if higher education is to present itself as something other than what can be captured by broad brushstrokes, but rather as something that is worth a deeper look, a finer point, more vibrant colors, and a more beautiful rendering.

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