

## A Coalition for Life-Transformative Education

**Executive Summary.** American higher education today is at the heart of unprecedented opportunities to improve the quality of life—and equally unprecedented challenges. How we diagnose and respond to the rapidly unfolding megatrends before us today will have extraordinary consequences for our future.

On the one hand, higher education has never been more important—both for individuals and for societies. For example, consider just the accelerating advances in science—from AI to CRISPR to genetic engineering. These create both breathtaking possibilities for solving the world’s most vexing problems, and equally terrifying potential for causing global destabilization and unintended damage. The only rational path forward is a modern and rigorous higher education for all. And nowhere is this more obvious than in America, where many of these advances were conceived and launched.

On the other hand, in recent years, the higher education enterprise in America has become extraordinarily unpopular. The public has lost faith in the commitment of higher education to the public good. The combination of spiraling sticker prices, increasing student debt, examples of disappointing job opportunities for college graduates, corruption in admission practices, and widely perceived political bias on campus has provoked increasing legislative intervention and significant decline in state subsidies for public higher education—just when it should, instead, be expanding. It is imperative that we do what we can to diagnose this problem and turn it around as soon as possible.

Contributing to this situation is the narrow lens through which the public often views higher education. The conversation is often fundamentally about improving financial security and providing upward mobility. In fact, our own explanation of the principal reason why “college for all” is important often rests upon this premise. But the public increasingly no longer believes this. While upward mobility remains true for many Americans, too many others do not have this experience today.

While data still support that completing a college degree correlates on average with higher lifetime earnings—and colleges have focused hard and largely successfully on increasing graduation rates—what we want most in life goes well beyond financial security. “Well-being” encompasses much more than higher earnings. Fortunately, recent research is shedding light on the kind of higher education that not only contributes to financial security but also has the potential to double the well-being and work engagement of graduates years after graduation. This kind of education might be called “life-transformative,” and among its central features are the provision of appropriate emotional support and exposure to appropriate experiential learning for all students. For graduates who experienced this life-changing outcome, they most often report that “someone cared about me as a person,” and “I had the opportunity to apply what I learned every year.” That is, a college education is not just about books and tests—it is about life.

The Coalition for Life-Transformative Education is a community of diverse but like-minded university leaders who are committed to developing methods of providing this life-transformative educational experience—at scale—to all undergraduates. We are committed to experimenting individually and collectively, to developing new pilot programs, sharing best practices, and collaborating to start a movement across America to ensure that Americans who enroll in college not only complete a degree, but also have a transforming educational experience that enhances their well-being and work engagement throughout life.

**Higher Education Has Never Been More Important.** One major trend today is the relentless and accelerating pace of fundamental technological advancement. For example, among the most important recent major developments is the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), “Big Data” and machine learning. We are just beginning to understand the great potential of this new tool to improve all aspects of life on the planet. It offers enormous potential for improving health, for mitigating climate change, for creating new materials and life forms, for aiding human creativity and art, and limitless other critical applications. It is now widely accepted that AI will change every field of human endeavor. As a result,

education in every field will be affected by this new development<sup>1</sup> and some western nations are planning major societal changes<sup>2</sup> based on these technological developments.

Similar staggering potential is now possible due to breakthrough achievements in CRISPR genetic engineering<sup>3</sup>, distributed manufacturing<sup>4</sup>, and the convergence of academic disciplines, to name only a few others. Solutions to many of the most vexing problems today are much nearer as a result of the great potential for application of these emerging new developments.

As a result, the late Charles Vest (former President of MIT and of the National Academy of Engineering) observed<sup>5</sup> that "...this is the most exciting period in human history for science and engineering. Exponential advances in knowledge, instrumentation, communication, and computational capabilities have created mind-boggling possibilities...."

Of course, these advances rely on the bedrock presumption of a highly educated population. However, in order for higher education to prepare the next generation to lead in these advances, a modern education must enable graduates to master these new advanced and emerging concepts, tools, and techniques. As a result, a rigorous and empowering college education has never been more important—both for society and for our children.

**Some Unintended Consequences.** As the application of AI (and other breakthrough methods) takes hold in industry and spreads throughout society, it is likely to have a number of unintended consequences. For example, it is likely to displace up to 40% of current jobs<sup>6</sup>—further illustrating the critical importance of a modern higher education for the advanced technological world we are entering. Many recent reports<sup>7</sup> have concluded that AI and emerging transformational technologies will fuel unprecedented global demand for advanced education and skills in the new economy, while simultaneously displacing many jobs that do not require a college education. Furthermore, the key to minimizing these unintended consequences of technology often resides with the early inclusion of considerations of the psychological, sociological, political, economic, and even religious dimensions to the complex interactions in society. This obviously requires sophisticated involvement of the liberal arts, reinforcing the growing importance of higher education, and adding a level urgency.

Furthermore, there are equally compelling global issues facing society that are not fundamentally rooted in science and technology. For example, what is the future of truth in the digital era? And what is the future of democracy? A broad, integrated and holistic education has never been more important.

**The Tragedy of Public Ambivalence.** Given these global trends and the urgency they imply, one would assume that citizens in the U.S.—the most technologically advanced society in the world, a society that has led in the research that created many of the recent breakthroughs, and whose higher education is the envy of the world<sup>8</sup>—that these citizens would treasure the educational opportunities they possess and that demand for higher education among U.S. citizens would be among the highest in the world. However, there are alarming indications that this is not the case. In fact, far from it.

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<sup>1</sup> [MIT Reshapes Itself to Reshape the Future](#), MIT News, 18 October, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "Realizing Society 5.0," Abenomics, [Japanese government initiative](#)

<sup>3</sup> Kaltwasser, Jared, "[CRISPR Breakthrough Could Help Scientists More Quickly Combat Pathogens](#)," ContagionLive, 12 June 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Gerschenfeld, Neil, Gerschenfeld, Alan, Cutcher-Gerschenfeld, Joel, [Designing Reality: How To Survive and Thrive in the Third Digital Revolution](#), Basic Books, 14 November 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Vest, Charles M., [Educating Engineers for 2020 and Beyond](#), The Bridge, Vol. 36, Issue 2, 1 June 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Pelley, Scott, "[Facial and Emotional Recognition: How One Man is Advancing Artificial Intelligence](#)," 60 Minutes, CBS News, 14 July 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Manyika, James, [What Is The Future of Work?](#) McKinsey & Company, December 2017

<sup>8</sup> [Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2019](#)

Now—for the first time—higher education in America is facing unprecedented public disapproval<sup>9</sup>. A recent documentary film<sup>10</sup> chronicles the aggressive efforts in several states to fire the university president, reduce or eliminate academic freedom on campus, reduce state funding, and refocus the mission of the flagship research universities in several states on job training. Most recently, the Governor of Alaska vetoed a funding bill for the state’s public universities that has forced a financial emergency throughout the system<sup>11</sup>.

Universities in America are seen as out of touch with the priorities of the public, too focused on research at the expense of teaching, politically biased, and more interested in enhancing their own finances and reputation than in serving the public good<sup>12</sup>. Erosion of public trust in open dialogue and commitment to free speech on campus has led to recent politically charged proposals to enforce free speech on campus<sup>13,14</sup>. Recent college admissions scandals further erode public trust in the commitment of American higher education to provide fair access to deserving students<sup>15,16</sup>.

There is a complicated history to this story, but one of the most important themes is the rising cost of higher education that resulted from the Great Recession of 2008. Nearly every state substantially reduced financial support for public higher education in response to the recession, leaving the institutions little choice but to increase tuition. While the rest of the economy has seen substantial recovery, state appropriations in support of higher education have not recovered. As a result, 44 of 49 states spent less per-student on higher education in 2017 than they did in 2008, and the published tuition rate at four-year public institutions rose 35% from 2008 to 2017. In several states tuition has more than doubled during this period. The net result is that higher education is less affordable today and therefore less accessible, and the quality and breadth of offerings is reduced<sup>17</sup>. One result is that rising student debt has become a major concern of the public<sup>18</sup>. About 44 million graduates hold student debt, and today’s graduates leave school holding promissory notes worth an average of \$37,000, raising concerns that the burden is creating a cascade of pressures compelling many to put off traditional life milestones<sup>19</sup>.

**Is Our Narrative Losing Its Validity?** The traditional message to the public from higher education is that receiving a college degree is the most important first step you can take toward a better life. We relentlessly cite the statistic that college graduates, on average, earn about \$1 million more over their lifetime than those without a college degree (which, of course, is true). In addition, college graduates are less likely to be unemployed, more likely to have employer-paid health insurance, and even have a

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<sup>9</sup> A [recent Pew survey](#) reported that in some political circles, colleges and universities are seen as problematic—with 58 percent of Republicans, for example, reporting that higher education “is bad for the country.” The [most recent Pew survey](#) reports that the majority of all Americans feel that higher education is “heading in the wrong direction” (although there is disagreement about which path is the right one).

<sup>10</sup> [STARVING THE BEAST](#) examines the on-going power struggle on college campuses across the nation as political and market-oriented forces push to disrupt and reform America’s public universities. The film documents a philosophical shift that seeks to reframe public higher education as a ‘value proposition’ to be borne by the beneficiary of a college degree rather than as a ‘public good’ for society. Financial winners and losers emerge in a struggle poised to profoundly change public higher education. The film focuses on dramas playing out at the University of Wisconsin, University of Virginia, University of North Carolina, Louisiana State University, University of Texas and Texas A&M.

<sup>11</sup> Svrugla, Susan, [“University of Alaska declares financial emergency in face of deep budget cuts,”](#) *The Washington Post*, 23 July 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg, John S., [“Education for the public good,”](#) *Harvard Magazine*, 8 April 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Camera, Lauren, [“Campus free speech laws ignite the country,”](#) *U.S. News & World Report*, 31 July 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence, Frederick M., [“The contours of free expression on campus: free speech, academic freedom, and civility,”](#) *Liberal Education*, AAC&U, Spring 2017, Vol. 103, No. 2

<sup>15</sup> [2019 college admission bribery scandal](#), Wikipedia.org

<sup>16</sup> [College Admissions Scandal. Complete coverage of a brazen cheating scheme.](#) *New York Times*.

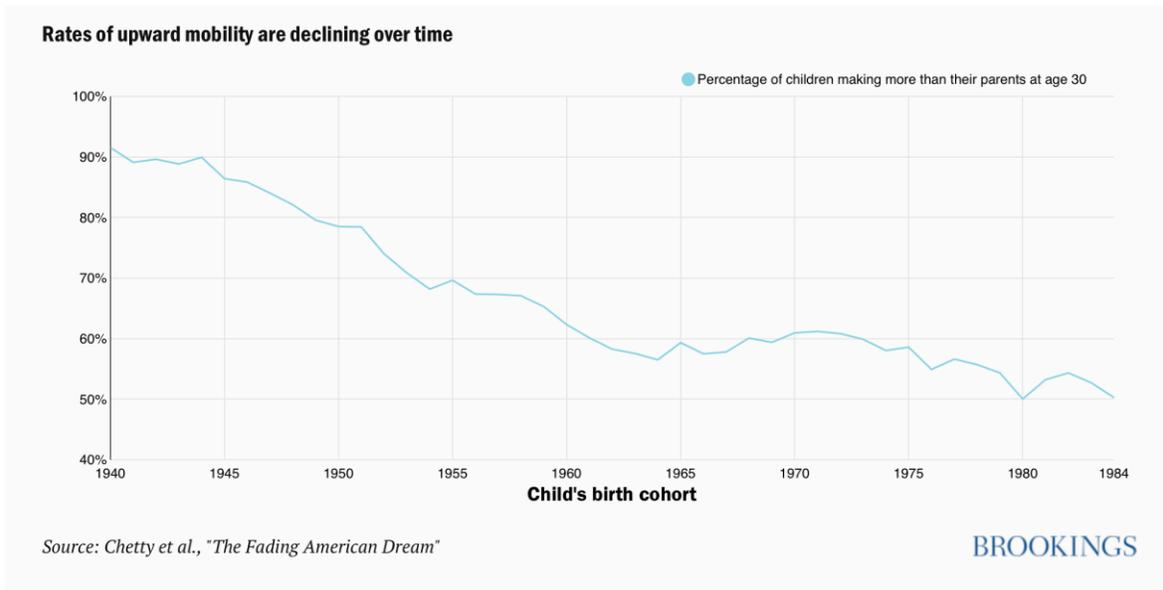
<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, Michael, Leachman, Michael, and Masterson, Kathleen, [“A lost decade in higher education funding: state cuts have driven up tuition and reduced quality,”](#) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 23 August 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ingraham, Christopher, [“7 ways \\$1.6 trillion dollars in student loan debt affects the U.S. economy,”](#) *The Washington Post*, Business, 25 June 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, Christopher L., and Robb, Cliff A., [“The student debt crisis: could it slow the U.S. economy?”](#) *Knowledge@Wharton*, University of Pennsylvania, 22 October 2018.

significantly longer life expectancy<sup>20</sup>. We also tell students that in the long run it doesn't matter what you major in. It will all work out in the end<sup>21</sup>. These have been the bedrock of the argument that higher education is the engine of upward mobility for more than a hundred years, and is therefore fundamentally a public good.

However, in recent years, research provides a different picture. Instead, studies show that social mobility in America has declined substantially in recent years<sup>22</sup>.



This substantial decline in upward mobility is accompanied by a simultaneous substantial increase in the percentage of Americans who have obtained a college degree<sup>23</sup>.

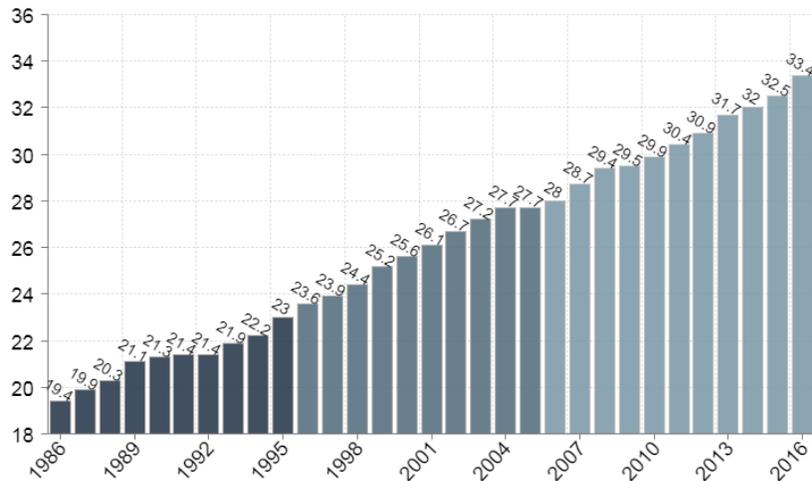
<sup>20</sup> [How does a college degree improve graduates' employment and earnings potential?](#) Association of Public Land Grant Universities.

<sup>21</sup> Stahl, Ashley, "[Six reasons why your college major doesn't matter](#)," *Forbes*, 12 August 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Krause, Eleanor, and Sawhill, Isabel V., "[Seven reasons to worry about the American middle class](#)," *Social Mobility Memos*, Brookings, 5 June 2018.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.mastersdegree.net/percentage-americans-college-degrees-increased/>

## The Percentage of Americans With College Degrees



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

MastersDegree.net/StatisticsPortal  
Higher Education Statistics, Charts and Infographics

These observational facts that clearly contradict our message may provide an important clue as to why the public skepticism about the value of higher education is growing. Apparently, something more than a college degree is required to obtain a better life. Of course, a college degree remains essential to obtaining an engaged and prosperous future today, but the situation is more nuanced and complex than indicated by our simple message.

Furthermore, a closer look at the notion that it doesn't matter what you major in shows that this is also misleading:

“...As we found in our recent study, *What's It Worth?: The Economic Value of College Majors*, because of the role it plays in occupational training, the choice of undergraduate major is as critical a choice as whether to get a college degree at all. ... The point is a simple one: while it is important to discuss the benefits of college in general, for too long we have treated all college degrees as though they had the same economic value. We have glossed over the differences between workers with a major in Mathematics and workers with a major in Drama and Theater Arts to the detriment of students. The plain truth is that the labor market does not treat these workers the same—and students deserve to know that. A love of Shakespeare should not deter students from becoming English majors. But we believe that students should know how their educational choices will affect the rest of their adult lives, in terms of the careers they will have, their expected earnings, and whether they are likely to need graduate education—which they may need to take out loans to get.”<sup>24</sup>

Further corroboration of this point is easily obtained by exploring the data on career earnings of college graduates as determined by undergraduate major available at the interactive website provided by the Hamilton Study of the Brookings Institution<sup>25</sup>.

**It's Time to Reframe the Conversation—Our Value is Far More Than Financial!** First, we must continue to encourage all students to pursue higher education. It has never been more important to their

<sup>24</sup> Carnavale, Anthony P., and Melton, Michelle, “[Major differences: why undergraduate majors matter](#),” [Back to the Presidency](#), American Council on Education, Fall 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Dews, Fred, “[Compare lifetime earnings by college major with new Hamilton Project Interactive](#),” [Brookings Now](#), Brookings, 29 September 2014.

future and to the future of the nation's workforce. It is still true that on average, their lives are more likely to be improved in multiple ways if they complete a college degree. Efforts to increase college attendance and completion rates are important and should be continued. We can, and must, improve our advising so fewer students are disappointed with their outcome.

However, it is time we raised the bar and set our sights higher than simply completing a college degree. The over-simplified notion that just completing a college degree—at any college, in any discipline, at any price—will assure you a better life is too often no longer valid. We need to provide better guidance to maximize the benefit that higher education will provide each student. We need to examine what we do in the academy and focus on those things that are working. We need to stop defending over-simplified notions that are not supported by evidence and begin to rebuild the public trust. (To fail to provide more informed and helpful guidance may be somewhat like advising patients that those who visit the pharmacy have better medical outcomes than those that don't—while implying that it doesn't matter what medication you take, at what time, or in what dosage.)

**What We Want Most for Our Children and for Society is Wellbeing and Happiness.** We want to build a future in which higher education focuses on what matters most, which surely includes a completion of college and securing purposeful employment—but goes beyond these lowest common denominators. We want to contribute directly to developing graduates who will flourish later in life, who will enjoy well-being in all dimensions, and who will contribute to building a healthy, just and thriving society. In short, we want to focus on what it takes to provide a college education that truly transforms lives.

But first we need to understand what it is within the higher education environment that contributes to producing these results. Is there a critical body of content knowledge that produces great jobs and great lives? Is there a particular academic major? Do particular kinds of colleges do this well while others do not? Is there an optimal class size, campus location, faculty characteristics, student demographic, pedagogical style, etc. that is essential to producing the desired outcomes?

One recent attempt to explore questions of this kind was undertaken by the Gallup organization<sup>26</sup>. Over the last several years, they have conducted the largest survey of college graduates in history in order to explore what really mattered in their lives as it relates to their well-being later in life<sup>27</sup>. Tens of thousands of college graduates from hundreds of different universities are included in the survey. Graduates range in age from recent graduates to seasoned alumni more than forty years after graduation.

The results of this study are truly remarkable. In particular, they did not see the factors listed above as being of greatest importance—that is curriculum content, class size, campus characteristics, etc. Instead, the most interesting and important results obtained in the study are that graduates who strongly responded to two kinds of questions were found to have double the “well-being index”<sup>28</sup> of the national average. This metric is based on clinical healthcare research and behavioral economics and is used to compare the relative well-being of human populations across the globe<sup>29</sup>.

The Gallup survey results show a remarkable correlation with student experiences as undergraduates. Those who reported having had certain types of experiential learning while also reporting that “someone cared about me as a person” were more than twice as likely to report high levels of well-being and work engagement later in life. And this was true no matter how many years out from college they were.

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<sup>26</sup> Busted, Brandon, “[The real data revolution](#),” *Trusteeship*, Volume 4, No. 4, July/August 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “[Measuring college and university outcomes](#),” Gallup Alumni Survey.

<sup>28</sup> [The Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index](#) has a long history. Well-being is a concept that captures the important aspects of how people feel about and experience their daily lives — encompassing more than just physical health or economic indicators, well-being includes five elements: purpose, social, financial, community, and physical. The Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index is the world's largest data set on well-being, with over 2.5 million surveys fielded to date. The Well-Being Index provides in-depth insight into the well-being of populations, is frequently cited by national media, and has been leveraged by Nobel laureates and academicians for peer-review and scholarly articles. Gallup surveys over 10,000 randomly selected adults every month by mail. The resulting samples are projectable to about 98% of the U.S. adult population. (from the Gallup website)

<sup>29</sup> Buettner, Dan, “[The world's happiest places](#),” *National Geographic*, pp. 30-59, Vol. 232, No. 5, November 2017.

However, less than five percent of those surveyed strongly agreed that they had experienced both of these while an undergraduate student—meaning that the opportunity for improvement is substantial.

The Gallup results do not stand alone in identifying the opportunity for major improvement. The work of Carol Dweck<sup>30</sup> on Mindset<sup>31</sup> indicates that shaping the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of students—not just content knowledge—can be life-transformative. While her work has primarily been in the K-12 arena, more recent studies show that the same principles of growth mindset apply in higher education with very significant results<sup>32,33</sup>. A literature review<sup>34</sup> of related work showing the importance of attention to attitudes, behaviors and beliefs in the classroom provides additional evidence that the basic conclusions of the Gallup study are valid.

**The Coalition for Life-Transformative Education.** In response to these observations and findings, a diverse coalition of like-minded colleges and universities has formed and posed for themselves the following grand challenge question: If the learning experiences identified in the Gallup findings<sup>26</sup> and elsewhere are so profound, shouldn't we be intentional about ensuring that they are brought to every student, not merely those students who receive it through serendipity and optional co-curricular activities? All of us offer the kinds of experiences described in the Gallup findings and implicated as life-transformative. But to bring them to the scale of every student is a grand challenge in higher education.

*The institutions listed at the end of this document have committed to pursue the aspirational challenge stated above—to bring life-transformative educational experiences to every student at scale—at each of our institutions and to share what we learn, with each other and with every other organization (e.g., community colleges, continuing and professional education programs and high schools) which is interested in bringing life-transformative learning experiences to every student in America.*

The assembly of universities in this coalition—from across the nation, ranging from large to small, public and private, research and professional—is unprecedented in its breadth and ambition. It is also differentiated by its focus on what happens to students after graduation rather than a focus on degree completion. The two foci are not at odds of course. Indeed, we believe the kind of education we propose will lead to higher well-being and engagement both in college and for the rest of their lives.

### **Raising Our Sights – Aiming Beyond Financial Security and Upward Mobility**

#### Goals of Traditional Higher Education

Financial security

#### Goals of Life-Transformative Higher Education

Financial Security  
Sense of Purpose  
Social Engagement  
Healthy Lifestyle  
Engagement at Work

It is important to point out that achieving the goal of improved well-being provides many benefits to society as well as the individual. For example, employers report lower rates of absenteeism for employees that have high levels of well-being. In addition, health insurance companies report lower claims rates for employees with high levels of well-being<sup>35</sup>. Individuals with high levels of well-being are better engaged at work and more likely to be chosen for leadership positions. Individuals with high levels

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.nasonline.org/programs/awards/write-ups/2016-atkinson-dweck.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Dweck, Carol, [Mindset: the new psychology of success](#), Ballantine Books, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Jaschik, Scott, "[The impact of faculty attitudes about intelligence](#)," Inside Higher Ed, 18 February 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Phelan, Meagan, "[When professors see intelligence as innate, grades go down](#)," News, AAAS, 15 February 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Murphy, Mary, Coalition for life-transformative education: literature review, unpublished report, 30 September 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Kent, Jessica, "[Aetna, Harvard partner for population health research initiative: Aetna and the T.H. Chan School of Public Health will launch a five-year research collaboration to study the determinants of population health](#)," News, Health IT Analytics, 13 April 2018.

of well-being are more likely to be supportive of their alma mater and engaged in community support activities.

The blueprint for providing education that simultaneously transforms lives and prepares students for satisfying careers is clear. It must engender in students three things: identity, agency, and purpose. To develop a sense of identity, students must be helped to discover who they are and their place in the world—for many this is the original concept behind liberal arts education. But more than that, they must develop a sense of agency—an awareness of what they can do with what they learn and a sense of empowerment that comes from having successfully applied their knowledge to authentic problems in the world. Finally, they must develop a sense of purpose—the societal consciousness and intrinsic motivation to use what they learn for the greater good.

The recent seven-year study of the future of higher education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education identified “belonging” as the most important concern on college and university campuses today<sup>36</sup>. Based on two-thousand interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and constituents on ten disparate campuses across the nation, concerns about three kinds of belonging emerged from the conversations: (1) belonging within an academic discipline; (2) belonging within the college or university, and (3) belonging within a peer group. Clearly, students today are struggling with understanding their identity and place in the world. Until this is adequately addressed it is unlikely that they will be able to devote themselves to the task of deep learning of disciplinary content. The second most pressing concern on college and university campuses is mental health, primarily as manifest in anxiety and depression. (The fastest growing budget item on many university campuses today is the cost of psychological counseling for undergraduate students<sup>37,38</sup>.)

The kinds of experiences that develop these three characteristics are by now relatively well known. We boil them down to two specific learning experiences (in addition to our traditional educational programs) that we will aspire to bring to every student: 1) authentic learning experiences in which students apply what they have learned to real world situations, often with real clients and professional mentors, and 2) emotionally supportive mentors, the kind of mentor who not only advises and encourages but who shares a genuine interest in each student’s hopes and dreams.

While each of our institutions generally offer such opportunities to students currently, often through co-curricular activities (e.g., the National Academy of Engineering Grand Challenge Scholars Program) or well-managed internships, the incorporation of such learning into the core of the curriculum such that it reaches every student would require a paradigm shift for higher education at a time when such a shift is urgently needed. There are numerous paths to achieving these imperatives and the exact approach is left to each member university to explore. We intend to develop prototypes for curricular approaches that scale including work-based learning, research and community engagement courses. By assessing these as well as training instructors and mentors in learner-centric approaches that inspire as well as inform, whether in the classroom, online or in the field, we hope to rapidly identify promising paths and investments that will bridge the gap between what we do now and a truly life-transformative education that reaches every student.

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<sup>36</sup> Anderson, Jill, “[The future of college: exploring the experiences of students, faculty, and staff, Howard Gardner and his Project Zero team seek to illuminate the road ahead for higher education.](#)” *News & Events*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 4 February 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Wolverton, Brad, “[As students struggle with stress and depression, colleges act as counselors.](#)” *New York Times*, 21 February 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Hibbs, B. Janet, and Rostain, Anthony, “[Rising rates of college mental health services: new research from a large study shows steep rise in services use from 2007 to 2017.](#)” *Psychology Today*, 13 January 2019.

**Current Membership in the Coalition for Life-Transformative Education\***

Arizona State University	University of Rochester
Bucknell University	University of Southern California
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University	University of Texas at Austin
Olin College of Engineering	University of Virginia
University of Connecticut	Wake Forest University
University of Idaho	Washington University at St. Louis
University of Michigan—Dearborn	Wellesley College
Kern National Network for Caring and Character in Medicine**	

\*The Coalition is in formation. As we find our way and leaders change, we expect some evolution in the membership.

\*\*Senior advisor to the coalition