The Council of Independent Colleges

Creating **Tomorrow's Institutions**, Together

2026 Institute for Chief Academic Officers with Chief Advancement, Enrollment, Financial, and Marketing Communication Officers

November 7–10, 2026 ■ Baltimore, Maryland

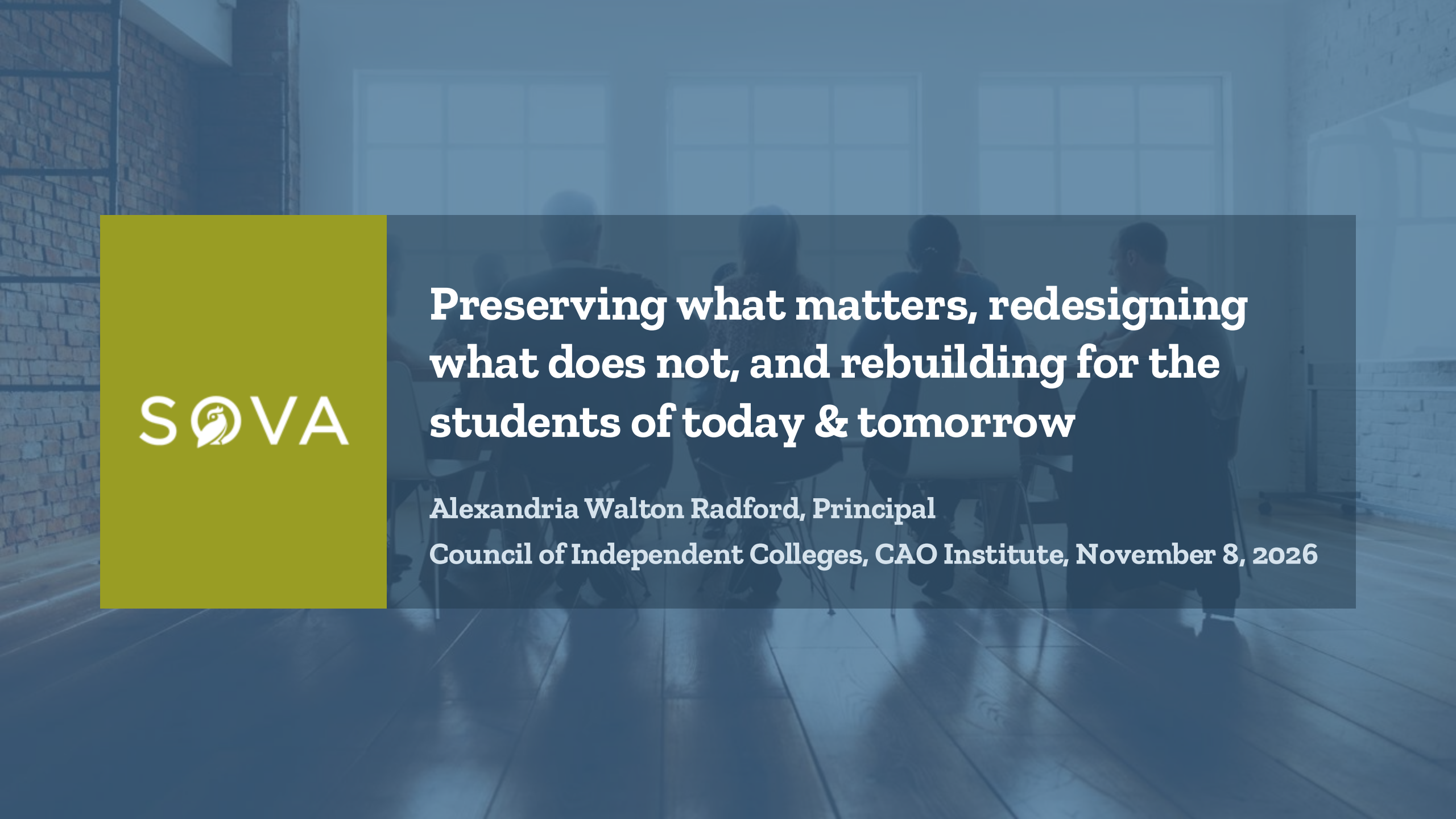
2026 Chief Academic Officer Award



Debora Johnson-Ross
Vice President for Academic Affairs
and Dean of the Faculty
Wartburg College (IA)

Thank you to our Sponsor

Cengage



Preserving what matters, redesigning what does not, and rebuilding for the students of today & tomorrow

Alexandria Walton Radford, Principal

Council of Independent Colleges, CAO Institute, November 8, 2026



Framing:
Reflect Back to Leap Forward

Your First Week of College

What were you most excited about?

What did you think would be the hardest part of college?

What did you hope college would make possible for you?

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Me, Freshman Year



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Three Turning Points in My Independent College Journey



Internships

In DC, I was shocked by how little evidence was used to shape policy.



A 20-Page Paper

My classmates grumbled. I loved it, and went to office hours.



An Insight

Higher ed is built on an appreciation for learning. Here, research and evidence should inform decision-making.

Led to 20+-year career distilling noise into insight on what students need, what works, and why.

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Why We're In This Line Of Work

If you're in this room, your story probably rhymes.

You believe in higher education's power and potential.

You want to harness it to improve students' lives.

Accepting The Need to Change

But also remember that your experience may not be that of today's students.

What worked for you and what you loved about your experience, may not be what today's students need.

Two Key Truths to Internalize to Meet the Moment

Colleges were built for students who are shrinking in number.

Institutions must (and can) evolve to meet the needs of students who are here and are coming,

and do so while staying true to their mission and core values.

Today's Roadmap For Getting There

Designing for the Future

1

National Trends

Who is here, who is coming, and the pressures on institutions

2

Campus Implications

What changes could mean for your campus and your role, and the evidence to gather

3

Campus Decisions

What to preserve, redesign, or build, and how to stress-test proposed strategies

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National Trends

Enrollment Numbers

NCES vs. WICHE Projections

NCES' Latest Projections for Total Fall Enrollment for Private Nonprofit and For-Profit Institutions Combined Suggest Growth Between 2021 and 2031

4.9M → 5.2M

WICHE's Latest Projections Predict Decline in High School Graduates Between 2025 to 2041

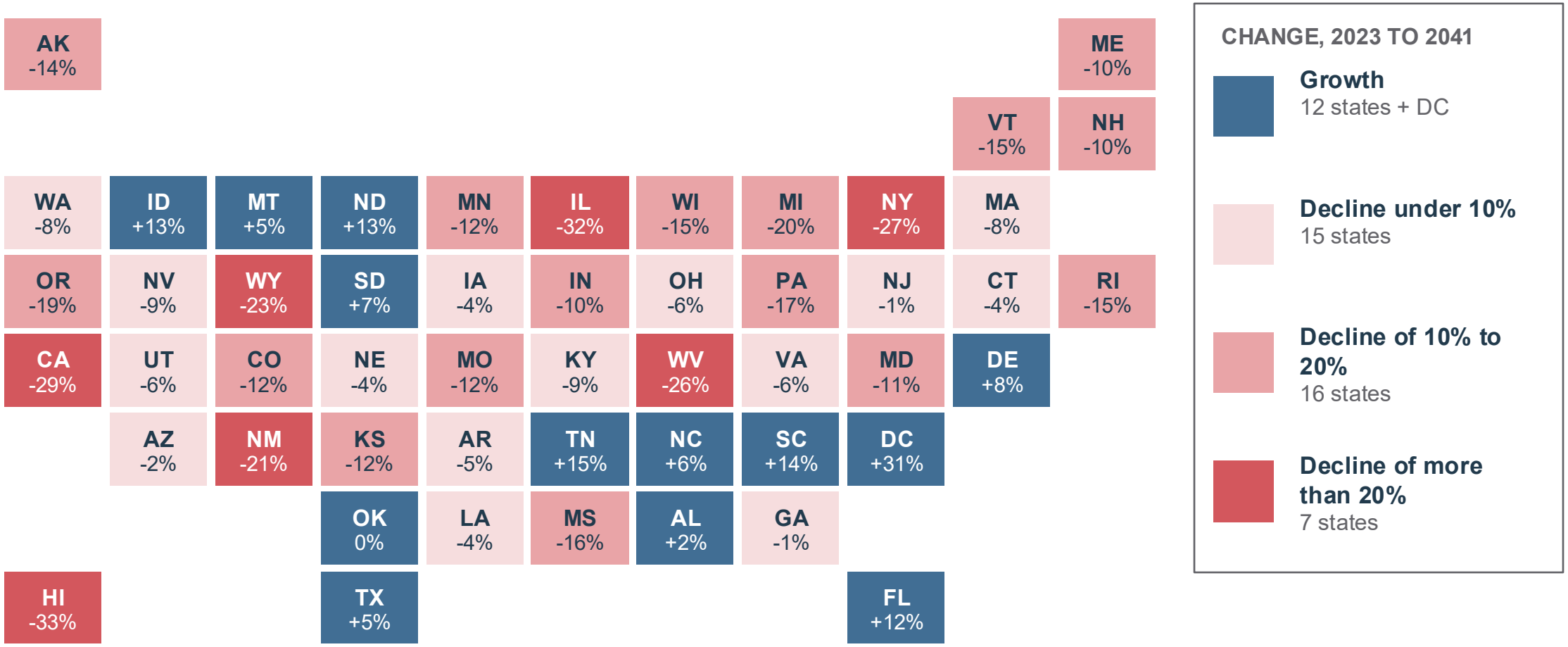
3.9M → 3.4M

Source: NCES Table 303.30 · WICHE, Knocking at the College Door

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High School Graduate Projections By State



Source: WICHE, Knocking at the College Door (2024), Fig. 17

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Not All Students Are Recent High School Graduates

Undergrads age 24 or older

28%

Private nonprofit 4-year colleges

38%

All colleges

(NPSAS:20)

+18%

NCES projects +18% enrollment growth nationally among students 35+ (and +4% growth for those ages 25–34) between 2019 and 2030

37.6M

Working-age adults with some college, no credential, and growing (NSC)

Source: Authors' Calculation Based on NPSAS:20 Using NCES' DataLab · NCES · NSC Some College, No Credential 2025

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Student Characteristics

First-Gen Share Is Falling, but Still Substantial

66% → 53%

Share of undergraduates who are first-generation, 1996 to 2020

Falling because parents' education rose, not that college access shrank.

41%

of undergraduates at private nonprofit four-year colleges were first-gen in 2020

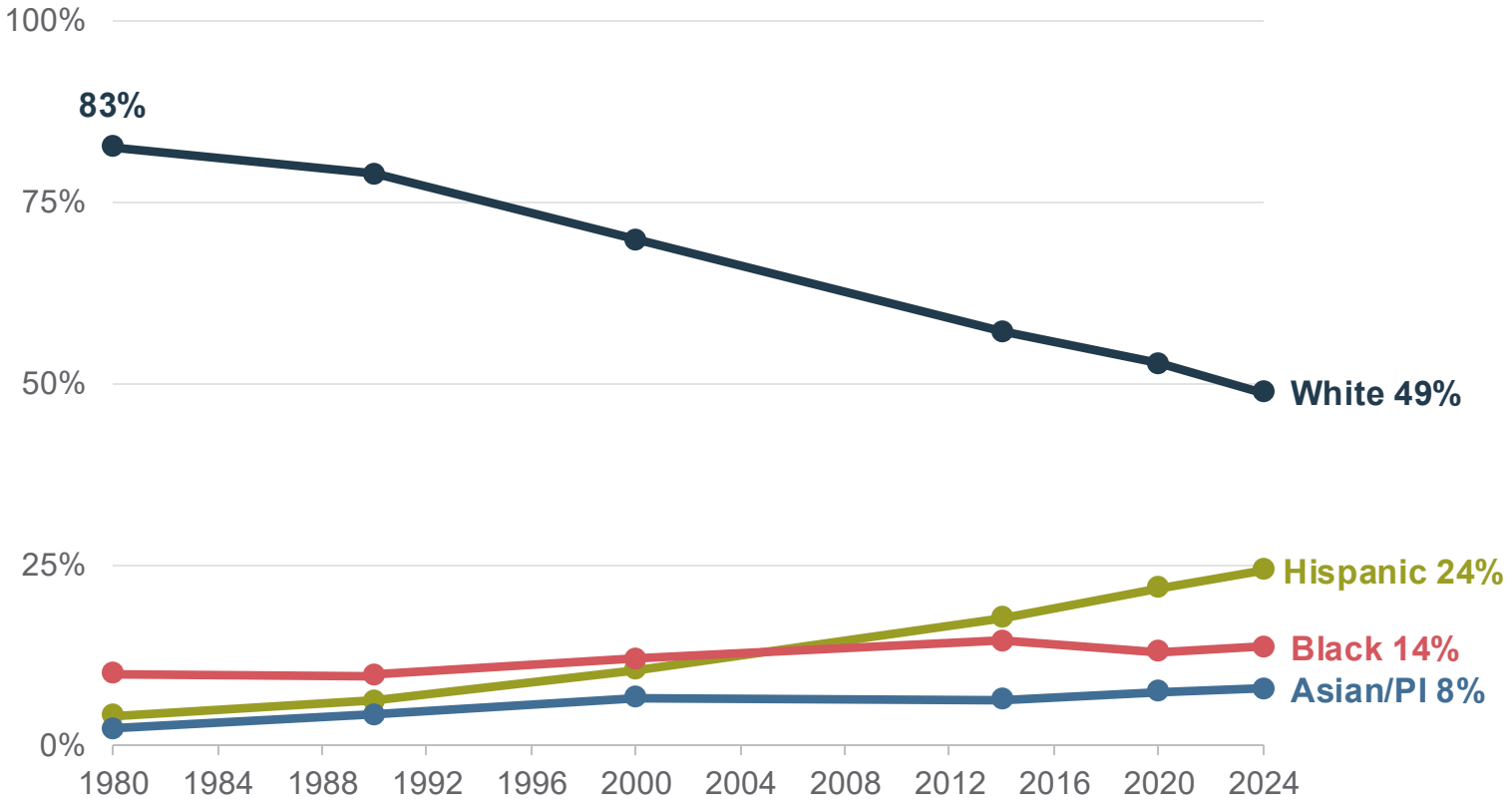
Source: Pell Institute brief · FirstGen Forward fact sheet

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Changes by Race/Ethnicity

Share of undergraduate enrollment, by race/ethnicity, 1980–2024



Source: NCES Table 306.10 · NCES Projections

Projected total postsecondary enrollees

+21%

Hispanic enrollment, projected 2020–2030

+19%

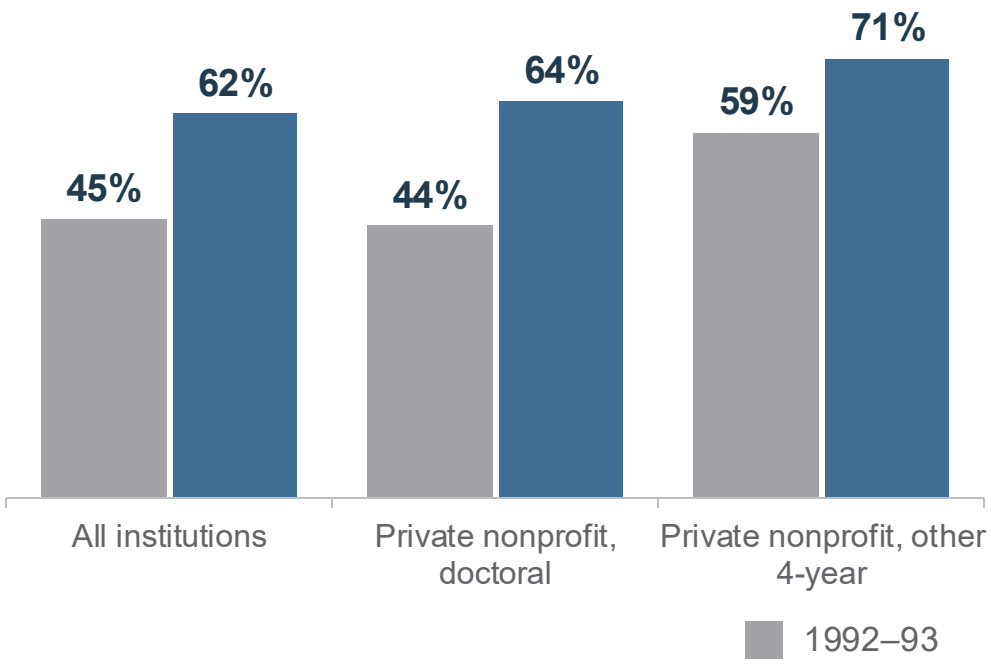
Black enrollment, projected 2020–2030

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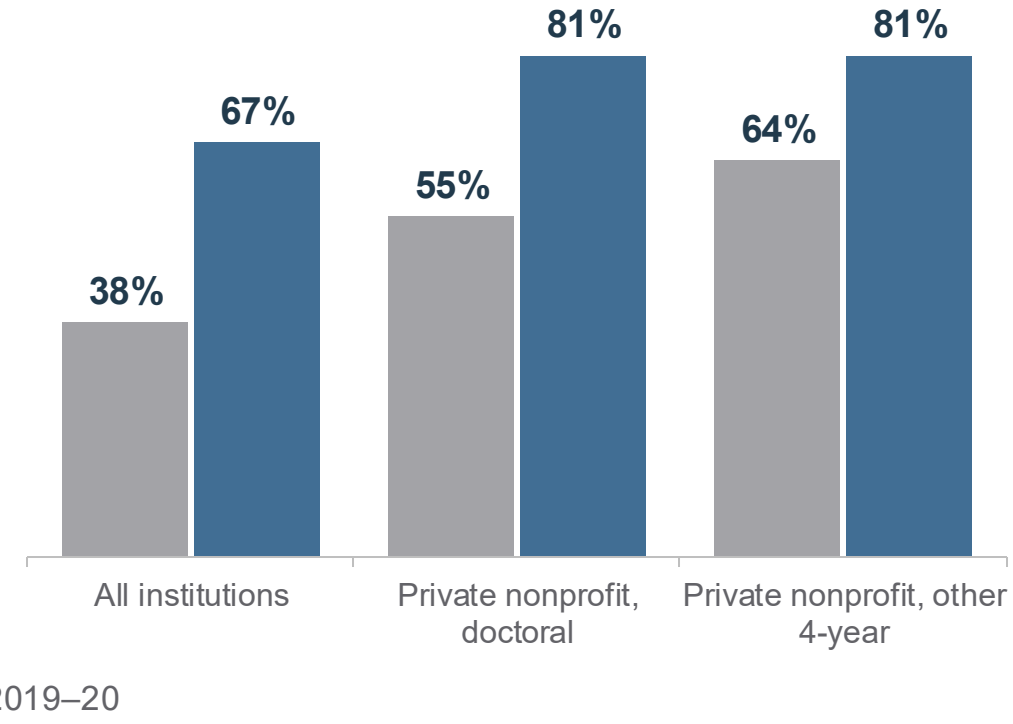
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Growth in Full-time, Full-Year UGs' Financial Aid Receipt

Federal aid



Non-federal aid



1992–93 2019–20

Source: NCES Table 331.60

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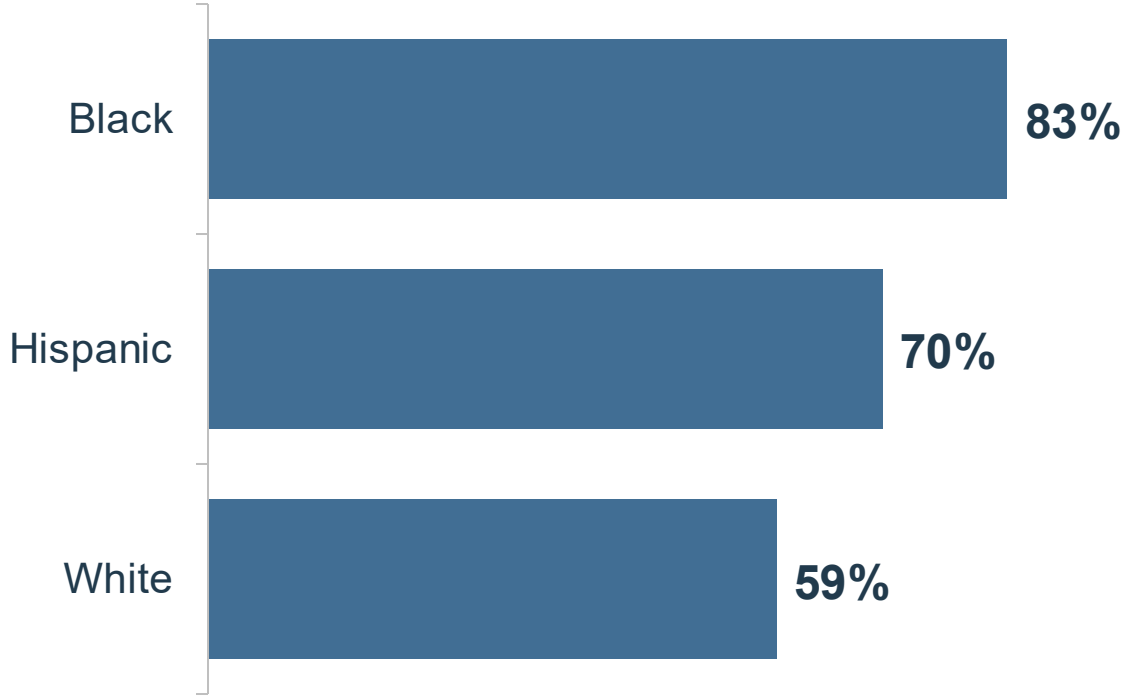
Financial Need is Likely to Grow

Financial need of enrollees likely to grow

As noted, NCES projects that Black and Hispanic enrollment will grow 19% and 21% between 2020 and 2030.

These groups are also the most likely to need federal aid.

Full-time, full-year undergraduates receiving federal aid, 2020



Source: NCES Table 331.35

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Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity

In 2020

19%

of undergraduates at private nonprofit 4-year colleges report low or very low food security

Among all undergraduates

35% of Black students

25% of Hispanic students

experience food insecurity.

Source: NPSAS 2020 (Hope Center)

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Academic Preparation Needs



High School Graduates

ACT and SAT scores have fallen since COVID; Faculty report declines too



Returning Adults

Rusty on content and study skills

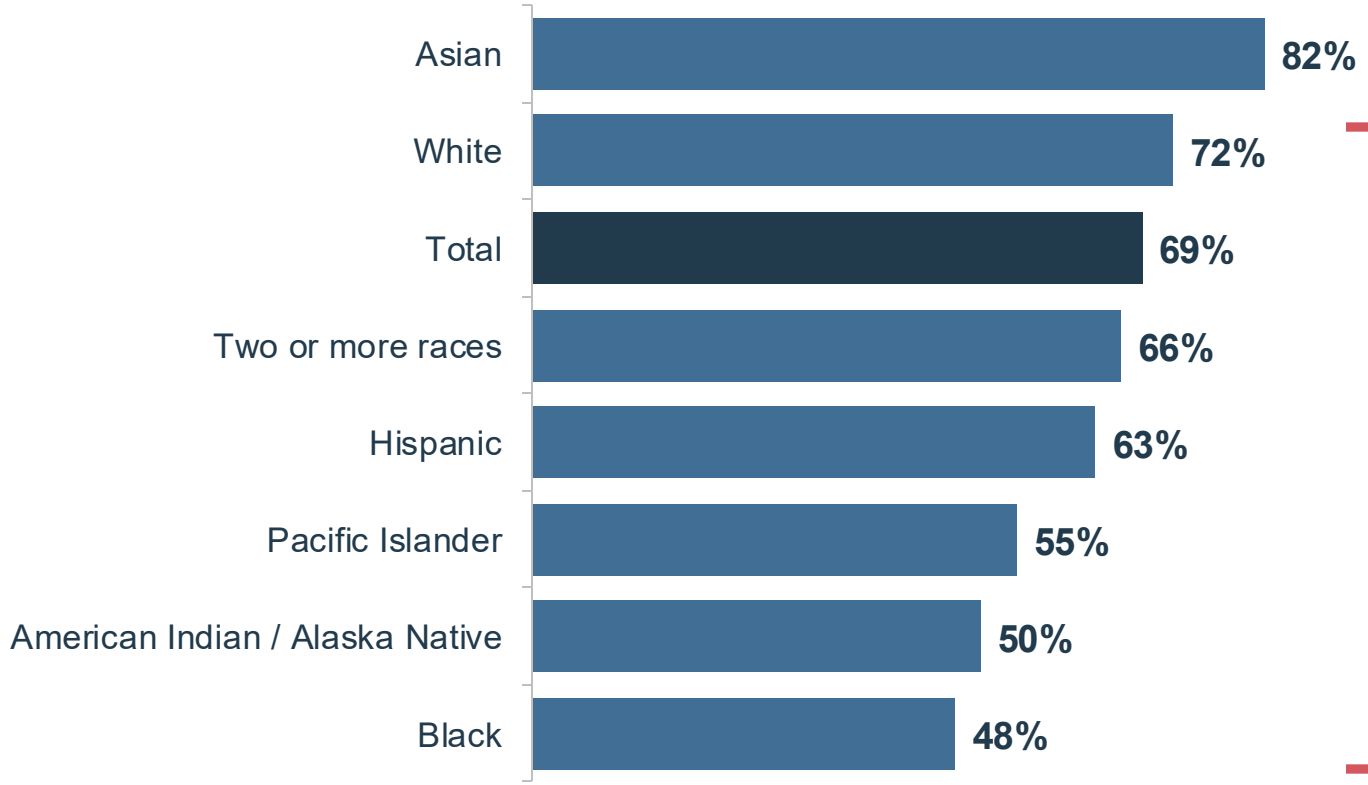
Source: EdWeek · College Board

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Completion Disparities

Six-year completion, private nonprofit 4-year, 2017 entry cohort



24

percentage points

The difference in between White and Black students' six-year completion rate (72% vs. 48%)

Source: NCES Table 326.10

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Public Opinion Challenges

The Public's Belief in College Has Declined Precipitously

70% → 31%

say a college education is "very important" (2013 → 2026)

WHAT'S DRIVING IT

Price tag and debt	Concerns about career payoff (exacerbated by AI)	Political skepticism

Source: Gallup, Oct. 2026 · Lumina, The College Reality Check

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AI and the Degree: The Public and Employers Diverge

AI will make a degree **LESS** important

46%

of adults

26%

of hiring decision-makers

Lumina–Gallup, June 2026 (adults); Aug. 2026 (hiring decision-makers)

AI will make a degree **MORE** important

20%

of adults

48%

of hiring decision-makers

Lumina–Gallup, June 2026 (adults); Aug. 2026 (hiring decision-makers)

66%

of "good jobs" in 2031 are projected to require a bachelor's degree

Georgetown CEW, 2024

Source: Gallup (public) · Gallup (employers) · Georgetown CEW

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Sustainability Challenges

Private Nonprofit 4-year Institutions' Closures Increasing

5

closures per year, on average, from 1990 to 2015.

Only 2 of those 25 years had double-digit closures (10 each).

NCES, 2024

13

closures per year, on average, from 2016 to 2022.

All 7 of those years had double-digit closures (between 12 to 16).

NCES, 2024

1 in 4

Private nonprofit degree-granting colleges could face "financial exigency" within a decade.

Huron, 2025

Source: NCES Table 317.50 · Huron analysis of IPEDS

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Yesterday's Fixes Less Promising Going Forward



Undergraduate

Fewer H.S. students going to college
More tuition discounting



Graduate Growth

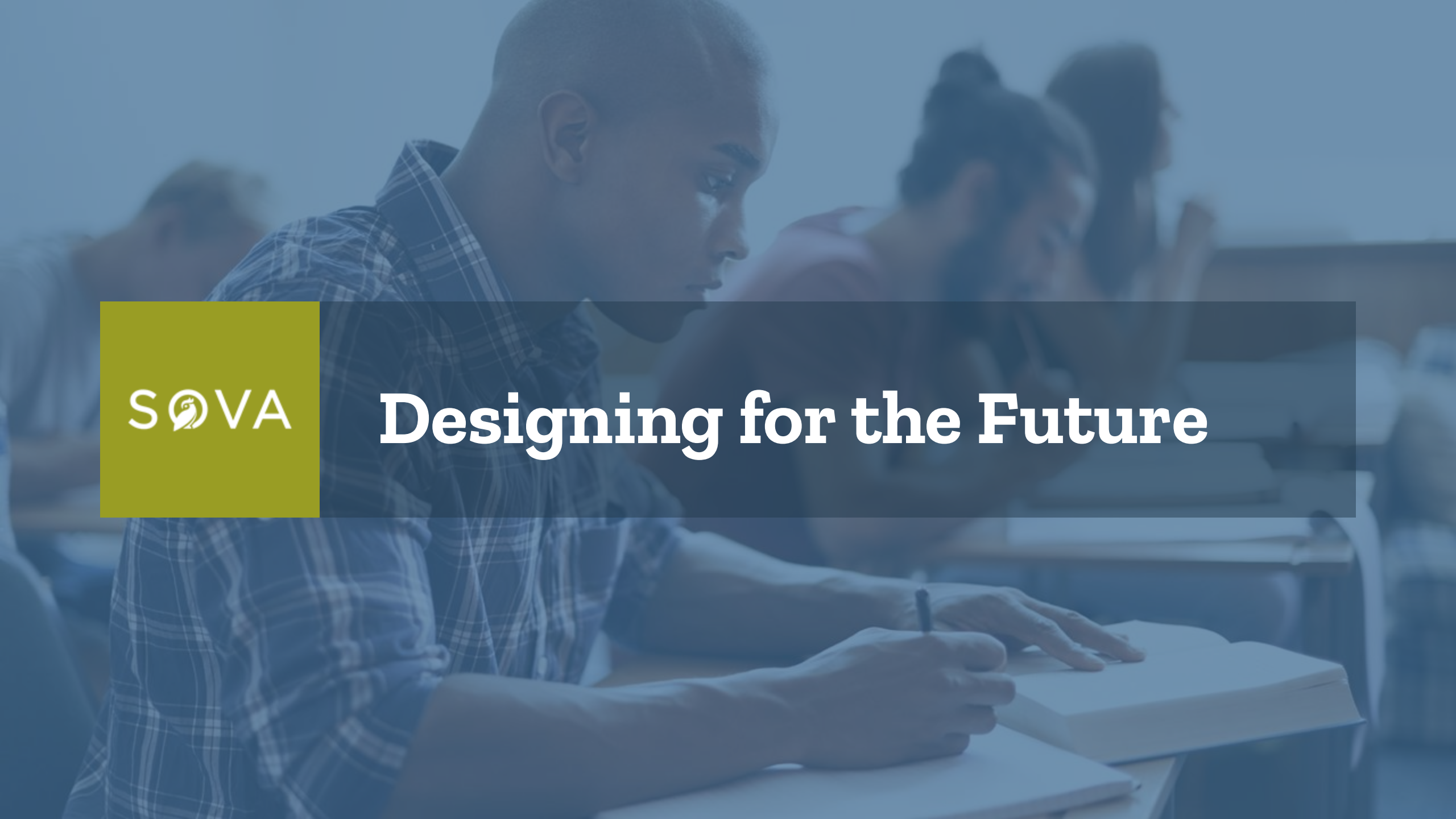
International enrollment is harder
Grad PLUS loans are changing

The result: less margin for error

Source: Kansas City Fed

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Designing for the Future

Know Your Campus: Four Kinds of Evidence Needed



Quantitative

Who enrolls, and where do we lose them? In which year and after which experience?



Qualitative

What do faculty, staff, and especially students see and experience on campus? What is most valued? What needs improvement?



History

What have we, and colleges like us, already tried to address changes and the implications of those changes?



Evidence of Impact

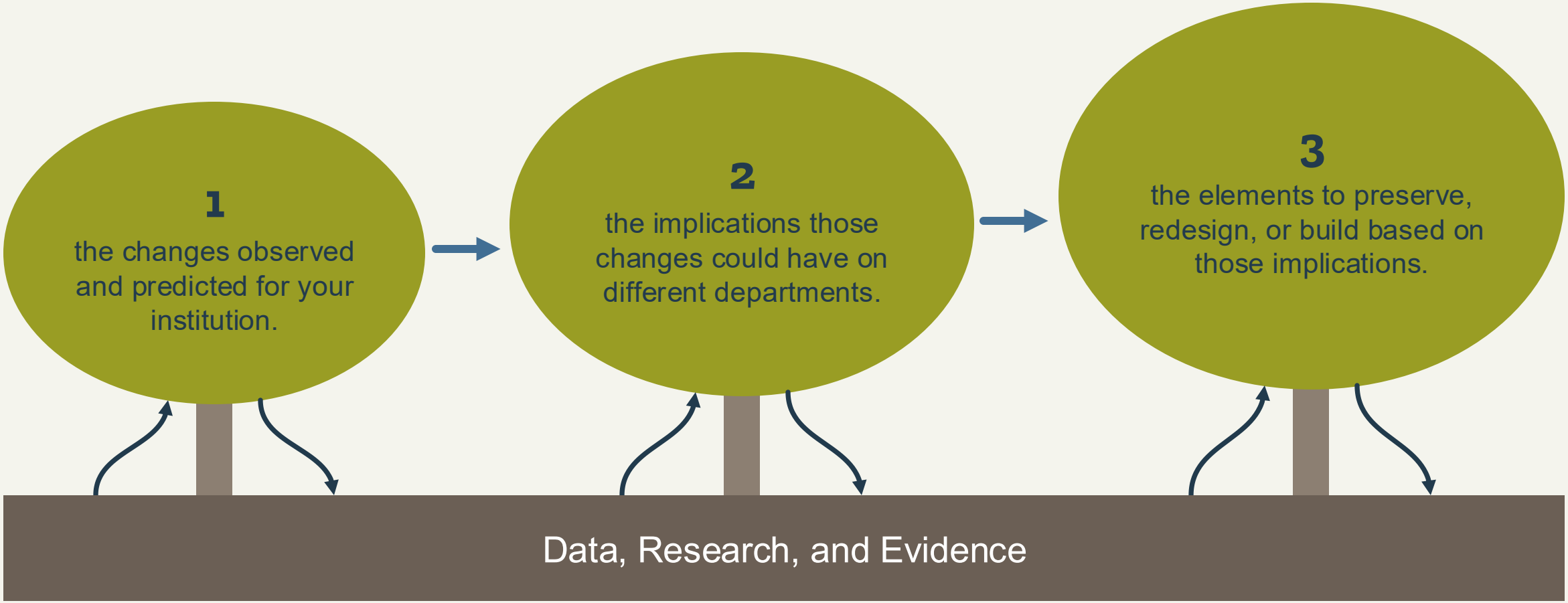
What evidence do we have of what is working and what could be improved? Which strategies should be prioritized for evaluation?

What is the current capability and capacity of your institution to provide this?

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You Need to Determine…



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Example Change With Potential Implications for Divisions

Example Change: Campus is serving a more diverse student body, with more students needing aid

Academic Affairs	Finance	Enrollment & Marketing	Advancement
What does this mean in terms of the training faculty need and the mentoring students need? What more can be done to drive faculty toward using Open Educational Resources and early alert systems?	If more students need more aid and other supports, what does that mean for the budget and resource allocation? What are we doing to measure the ROI and financial stability of supports we may need to expand?	When did we last audit our materials and website through the lens of those we seek to enroll? Are we using language that resonates with our intended audience? How do we know?	Do our data and stories show donors and alumni who we serve now? Where can we get more data and stories? How are we tracking how donors and alumni are responding to our messaging?

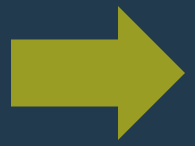
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What Is Scarce Has Changed

INSTITUTIONS WERE BUILT TO ADDRESS STUDENTS'

Scarcity of knowledge



TODAY'S STUDENTS MAY ALSO HAVE A SCARCITY OF

- Time
- Certainty
- Attention
- Belonging
- Economic resources

That Has Implications for Institutional Design

Another Example Change With Implications for Divisions

Example Change: Falling confidence in the value of a degree

Academic Affairs	Finance	Enrollment & Marketing	Advancement
What do graduates need to know about working with AI and where is that taught? How are we ensuring students can articulate their AI expertise and career readiness to employers? How do we know?	What is our real net-price experience, and how does it compare with students' wants and ability to pay? Can we leverage our expertise to offer other credentials that meet students' needs and desired price points?	How can we convey our return on investment to skeptical students and families? Can K-12 and employer partnerships build trust and enrollment pipelines into our institution?	What outcomes evidence and stories do we have that can excite donors and alumni about the value our institution is providing? What might we need to collect?

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Tree 3: Determining Elements to…

PRESERVE	REDESIGN	BUILD
Is this a core value fundamental to why students choose us or succeed here?	Is the purpose still right, but the structure built for a student who no longer predominates?	Is there a market or a need that we want to address but currently cannot?

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Preserve: Likely Examples

PRESERVE

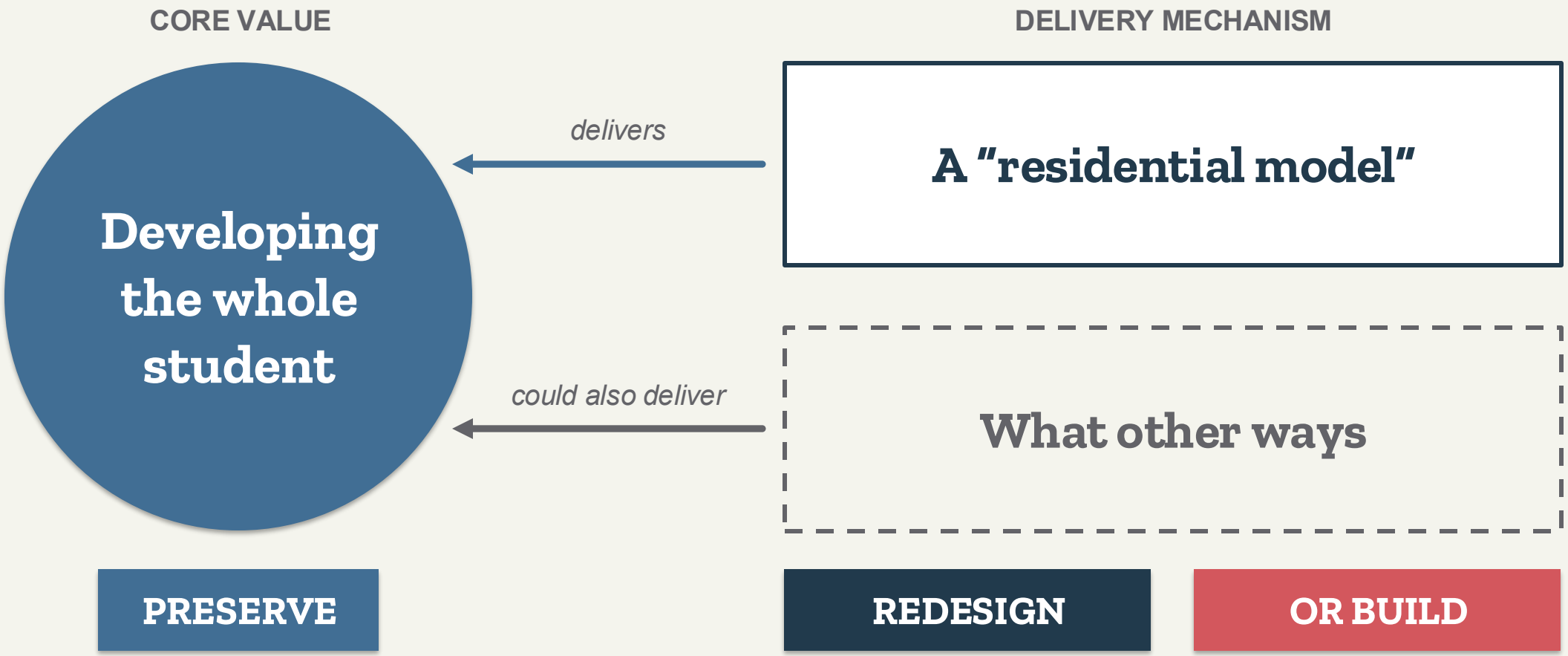
Is this a core value fundamental to why students choose us or succeed here?

- Relationship-rich teaching
- Close faculty–student contact
- Advising that sees the whole student
- A distinctive intellectual or faith tradition
- Belonging

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Core Values vs. Delivery Mechanisms



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Redesign vs. Build: Examples

REDESIGN

Is the purpose still right, but the structure built for a student who no longer predominates?

Communications	Calendar and scheduling
Transfer and prior learning	Support service hours and modality
Admissions and onboarding	Aid and pricing
Curriculum	

BUILD

Is there a market or a need that we want to address but currently cannot?

Dual Enrollment	Flexible or hybrid formats
Reskilling/Upskilling	Early-alert systems
Adult and returner pathways	Collaborations with other institutions
Short-term credentials	Family supports and childcare

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Stress Test For Proposed Redesign and Build Strategies

Check every proposed strategy against three questions



Mission

Does this strategy advance our mission?



Evidence

Is our strategy sufficiently evidence-informed and do we have a plan to evaluate its impact and cost?



Sustainability

Can our institution sustain this strategy structurally and financially?

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Going Forward

While You're Here: Bond and Brainstorm



With your role-mates at other institutions

Ask them what they are doing about a change you are wrestling with.



With campus colleagues in other roles

Tell them about a change you are wrestling with. See if they know who has, is, or should be thinking about this change too on campus.

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Embrace the Question of the Moment

NOT

~~How do we keep doing what we've done with fewer students?~~



INSTEAD

Who are (or could be) our students, and what should we build around them?

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And Remember…

Mission is what you protect.

Delivery is what you are free to change.



Thank You.

Questions?

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