



# Navigating the U.S. Higher Education System and Current Trends

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# Agenda

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- Overview of the U.S. Higher Education System
- Key Characteristics of the System
- Current Trends
- The Undergraduate and Graduate Student Experience
- Accreditation and Classification
- Concluding Thoughts



# Overview of U.S. System

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Second largest higher education system in the world with over 3,900 institutions recognized by the Carnegie Classification list

- Down from 4,300 recognized institutions in 2018

Over 19 million undergraduate students currently enrolled in tertiary education in the U.S.

## Key Characteristics of the Current System

- High Participation System
- Stratification
- Flexibility/Mobility
- Student Experience



# Institution Types and Enrollment

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## Enrollment in U.S. Institutions



Data from most recent NCES survey<sup>1</sup>



# Institutional Differences

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**Cost of  
Attendance**

**Size and  
geographic  
location**

**Academic  
Course  
Offerings**

**Campus  
Life**

**Research and  
Experiential  
Offerings**

**Student  
Population**

**International  
Student  
Support**



# Student Life

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# Student Flexibility - Undergraduates

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Four-year course of study leading to a bachelor's degree.

- First two years spent on general education courses.
- Final two years on courses specific to student's chosen major.

Students do not need to declare their major (course of study) until end of second year. They are also able to change their major, double major, or add minor courses of study.

Ability exists to take courses in non-degree field – a biology major may take English and history classes, for example.

Transferring universities is very common in the U.S.



# Student Flexibility - Graduate

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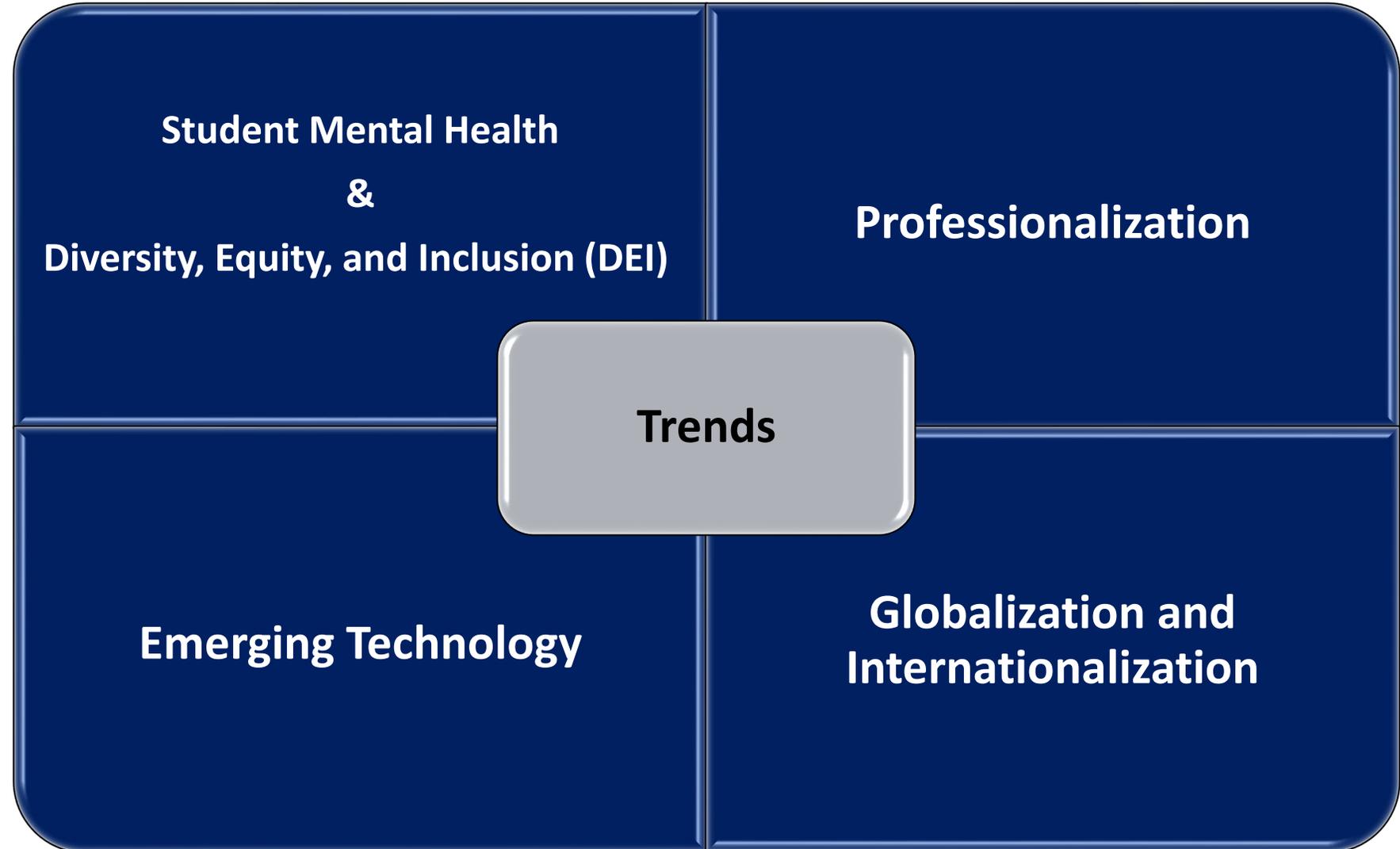
Graduate courses of study offer less flexibility than undergraduate courses because of the specialized nature of the academic program.

Graduate students are still able to take classes in other faculties, collaborate on research, and can transfer in certain instances.



# Current Trends

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More students are facing mental health concerns than before the pandemic and are reporting lower levels of well-being.<sup>2</sup>

Faculty often serve as first layer of support, which can overstretch their capacity.

Universities do not have adequate mental health support staffing.<sup>2</sup>

Graduate students may face challenges due to shorter transition periods, more specialized programs, and program structure.

### Key Take-Aways

Mental health is a critical component of student success and rates of mental health concerns have increased after COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

Undergraduate and graduate students should know of their university's support prior to matriculating and should plan on how to safeguard their mental health using the supports available.



# Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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## Understanding DEI's Importance

- Graduate student diversity statements
- Required DEI focused classes
- Staff/faculty training and development
- Institutional mission alignment

## Diverse faculty/staff/students

- Expectations of inclusive, welcoming environment
- Access and belonging programming to support university community
- Reevaluating curriculums, approaches, and more



# Professionalization's Implications

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1. Increased strategic focus on internship and career support services.
2. Mergers and closings of universities, particularly small liberal arts colleges.
  - Raises questions about the value of higher education.<sup>2</sup>
3. Increasing numbers of adult learners and non-degree credentials, like certificates or skills-based courses.
4. Continued emphasis on “whole-person” development, but financial support is shifting away from liberal arts towards more workforce-oriented courses.<sup>2</sup>
5. Greater emphasis placed on the ROI of higher education.



# Emerging Technology

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## Teaching and Learning

- New opportunities emerging post-COVID for greater integration of new technology.
- Greater flexibility in course modality, providing students with greater flexibility and more options.

## Access and Enrollment

- Potentially greater access to universities and courses for students not in institution's geographic area. Recruitment potential.
- Can technology help further an institution's DEI policies?
- International students? Community building?



# Internationalization

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## Undergraduate & Graduate Students

- Increasing international student population
- Study abroad opportunities
- Career support for both domestic and international students
- International research and exchange opportunities
- Increased credentialling
- Increased support for international students

## Institutions

- Student recruitment
- Financial opportunities
- Institutional reputation and rankings
- Innovation
- Collaborative partnerships
- Faculty recruitment



# Carnegie Classification

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The Carnegie Classification is a listing of accredited, degree granting institutions. It allows for comparisons of U.S. institutions based on different identifying factors established by the framework.<sup>3</sup>

The Carnegie Classification can be referenced by students and advisors when considering attending schools in the U.S.

\*The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education is released every three years. 2021 is the most recent survey.

Category	Classification	What does that mean?	Additional Info
<b>Basic</b>	Doctoral Institution: High Research Activity	Villanova (VU) grants doctoral degrees and has the second highest research activity possible (R2)	R1 institutions have the highest research output. Classified as doctoral, masters
<b>Undergraduate Instructional Program</b>	Balanced Arts & Sciences/Professions, High Graduate Coexistence	Degrees are fairly equally distributed among fields. Grad programs are available in 50% of undergrad majors	
<b>Graduate Instructional Program</b>	Research Doctoral: STEM-Dominant	VU awards PhDs in multiple fields, but most are in STEM	“Social Science/Humanities Dominant” and “Professional Dominant” are other categories
<b>Enrollment Profile</b>	High Undergraduate	Graduate students account for 10-24% of full-time students	Ranges from exclusively undergraduate to exclusively graduate
<b>Undergraduate Profile</b>	Four-Year, Full-Time, More Selective, Lower Transfer-In	Most undergraduates started their degree at Villanova and did not transfer in.	“More Selective” is the highest classification
<b>Size and Setting</b>	Four-year, Medium, Highly Residential	VU’s lowest degree granted is a bachelor’s degree.	Urban, suburban, and rural location often influences student choice



# Accreditation Processes

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Accreditation of U.S. institution assures that the degrees awarded by the university are of quality and meet education standards. It is a legal status and impacts federal funding.

Students are strongly encouraged to apply to an accredited program/university.

Accreditation is overseen by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) – a nonprofit organization appointed by the U.S. Department of Education.

CHEA recognizes accreditation agencies that review universities and programs. Accreditation usually involves a self study, a site visit, and an evaluation.



# Tying it Together

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1. The U.S. higher education system is robust and diverse, with many different types of universities with unique characteristics.
2. Students should understand how to use the Carnegie Classification to research universities. They should only apply to accredited programs.
3. The current trends are professionalizing higher education and students should be prepared to discuss themselves, their DEIB focus, and how higher education helps them achieve their future plans in their application materials.
4. Student support is a key focus of higher education institutions.
5. Technology may impact how students engage with their campuses, their learning material, and their course mates. Students should practice flexibility as technology use progresses and changes.
6. The graduate experience is more specialized than the undergraduate experience, but they still have opportunities to engage with their campus community.
7. University choice is important! Consider cost, public v. private, research capacity, and program fit. Program fit is more important at the graduate level than university name.



**QUESTIONS?**

# References

1. National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS. (Spring 2021). Fall Enrollment component (provisional data). *U.S. Department of Education*.
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3. Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2021). Villanova University. *American Council on Education*.  
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