

The Top 10 Trends in P-12 and Higher Education, 2024

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Introduction

In the editorial for this edition of *Culture, Education, and Future*, the editor-in-chief, the editors, and the editorial board present our choices for the *top 10 trends in education for 2024*. These trends are side effects of technological advances, political changes, and shifting cultural preferences; we project that they will affect educational systems in the foreseeable future. We have generated two Top-10 lists, one for P-12 education and one for higher education.

We generate these lists to accomplish two goals. First, the intent is to focus readers' attention on emerging futures germane to this journal, events that emerge from or that generate cultural changes that affect education—culture, education, and the future. Second, the lists hopefully will stimulate researchers to write about subjects of interest to our readership, which will be appropriate submissions for *CEF*. If the list catches on, we may also make the *top 10 trends* an annual editorial.

The criteria for inclusion in our *Top 10* lists is related to a trend's importance as reflected in the frequency of headlines, editorials, and concerns found in educational news outlooks, such as *Education Week* and *Chronicles of Higher Education* (or equivalent outlets in various cultures). We additionally polled our Editors and the Editorial Board, who come from all over the globe, about trends in their cultures.

Several trends identified in the two lists are specific to given cultures, but most have more global influence. We invite scholars to write from both perspectives. The two sources list occasionally overlapped as they did regarding the impact of artificial intelligence, for example. In other cases, a trend was identified by different respondents for opposite reasons, such as when diversity policies were mentioned as opportunities by some and a problem by others. Finally, we saw regional differences that reflected efforts to rectify prior conditions such as colonialism or tradition. In each case, I have attempted to identify trends that are characteristic of large numbers of, if not cultures and nations.

Top 10 Trends in P-12 Education

#1. Artificial Intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence, or AI, is a clear number 1 choice for a top 10 trend in P-12 education for 2024. Generative AI, or the capacity to generate coherent, human-sounding text, presents several important challenges in K-12 education. An immediate, obvious challenge involves how integrating AI into P-12 curricula. Educators have experienced computers in

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education since 1976 with the first Apple Computer, but AI would seem to represent a leap forward that at least rivals the 1976 phase transition. However, it poses temptations to use AI programs such as the popular ChatGPT to write papers in fulfillment of class assignments. The temptation is to use generative AI instead of using one's brain. For now, the writing style of generative AI programs may be more sophisticated than many high school students are capable of, so plagiarism should be easy to spot. Further, AI still makes errors, some of which are obvious, which again will ease detection.

A bigger problem may relate to AI's ability to produce images that are hurtful or harmful—in effect, it offers new ways to bully or embarrass not previously available. For example, recently, a case arose in the U.S. in which some students generated and published fake nude pictures of girls in their schools. The capacity for such abuse is probably only in its infant stages; the future may bring many harmful examples.

In a more positive vein, educators will have to face the inevitability of AI and the challenge to revise their curricula to utilize AI's strengths. It could be used in the fine arts, for example, to generate pictures and paintings “in the style of...,” thus teaching students about artists and how to spot or hear stylistic differences. Science teachers could use it to help students visualize complex models, such as chemical isomers. They could teach students how to write more effectively, how to criticize writing, or how to spot grammatical errors (using the non-generative AI program Grammarly, for example).

#2. Immigration

A challenge in many countries is a close number 2 trend in education. The political fallout is obvious, and part of the reason is its effect on education. Masses of immigrants are burdening the financial resources of P-12 education. It stains the capacity of school systems to provide enough teachers to teach the additional students, particularly teachers with language skills needed for these children. School building capacity is stretched, as are resources such as textbooks and consumables. Transportation is challenged, as is the ability to feed so many additional children. Educational systems are sufficiently flexible to address these challenges, and if history serves us, immigration will prove beneficial to nations, but it may take years to do so.

#3. The COVID-19 Pandemic

Covid was declared over in about 2021, but it is not over in education. Educators may struggle with post-pandemic effects for some time yet. Students are struggling to catch up academically with losses experienced when schools were shut down during the peak years of COVID-19. Editorial board members from several cultures reported mental health problems and falling attendance rates among students. Higher education educators are reporting changed expectations and behaviors that may be due in part to COVID-19. The effects of this pandemic may still linger for a while.

#4. Violence

In the U.S., mass shootings in schools are considered an epidemic, and schools are struggling with safety policies and actions. The absolute number or percentage of shootings would be considered statistically low in other situations, but this situation is about the loss of children,

and the loss of even one child to violence is too high. Furthermore, the spinoff effect on the psyche of the nation and on children produces significant damage. Children deal with active shooter drills in elementary schools, they hear about mass shootings on TV, and they sense the anxiety of their parents. Safety measures drain limited resources that could go into instructional programs and materials. The challenge, then, is to protect schools from harm and to protect children from fear.

Other countries suffer even more virulent attacks on children. The violence of war with attendant poverty, fear, and power struggles is overwhelming for children. Here, the percentages are significant, as is the fear in which children live. They have no life experiences to contextualize such brutality and terror. Education becomes moot when students are starving or living with death and injury. Education is more than math and science; it is about learning to live civilly with others and working together to improve life. Education, society, and culture are failing children and warring countries because it is trumped by violence.

#5. LGBTQ+

The right to dignity for LGBTQ+ persons has become a battle line in politically divided nations, and public education has become its battleground. Battles are fought over bathrooms, dress codes, sports, and rainbow symbols. They are expressed in contentious confrontations in school board meetings, pressure in legislative hallways, demands to purge libraries of perceived offensive materials, and heated ultimatums in administrator's offices.

#6. Censorship

Book banning should have died ages ago, but it has instead persisted over the decades in many nations, even in nations that consider themselves to be enlightened. In the U.S., for example, some state and district policies and laws require schools to purge books, which is considered by some to be offensive. In some states, history textbooks must tell only legislatively approved stories, minimizing or omitting such topics as slavery and presenting sanitized visions of other events. Student's access to knowledge has long been considered a bulwark of democracy, but this powerful idea is constricted when ideas are limited by ideology. Students' access to knowledge is conscribed, and the vibrant exchanges of ideas that foster innovation, creativity, and solutions to challenges are made much less vibrant.

#7. DEI

DEI, or diversity, equity, and inclusion, is considered by some as a "woke" movement (defined as awareness of social inequalities) and by others as an effort to improve inclusive atmospheres in P-12 education. DEI is being strongly politicized in some countries. This has led to conflicts over (and policies in support of or against) teaching critical race theory in schools (usually defined incorrectly as teaching about one group's transgressions against another), the use of history textbooks that include material that is not preferred by the dominant culture, the inclusion of library books that advocate woke agendas, and to culturally responsive teaching or social justice. Several respondents among the Editors and the Editorial Board of *CEF* saw DEI as a tool for increasing diversity in schools and for addressing social unfairness in public education.

Whichever perspective one has, it is clear from both news literature and from respondents that

DEI-related issues were arousing significant emotions that were spilling into schools. Indeed, schools are frequently battlegrounds for these societal wars as people fight to have their vision of what is good for society reflected in curriculum, policies, and practices in public education.

#8. Teacher Shortages

Several respondents and educational news providers reported teacher shortages in education. This may be attributable to several events. Major contenders include increasing governmental intrusion into education, acrimonious battles among parents over book banning, curriculum, LGBTQ+, and similar issues, intrusive parental demands of administrators, increasing expectations of policymakers, and other such hot-button issues. Salary is perennially an issue and may play a role in current shortages as well.

#9. Governmental Reforms

Some respondents referenced government-enacted reforms that resulted in conflicts with teachers. Conflicts over reforms are particularly opposed by unionized teachers.

#10. Alternative Curricula

Several respondents described trends away from traditional college preparation curricula to curricula that include technological and vocational courses. A couple of the respondents mentioned pressure to place less emphasis on STEM courses and to include music and other humanities.

Noteworthy But Not in the Top 10 for P-12 Education

Respondents from the Editors and the Editorial Board that didn't make it to the top-10 list. The primary reason for their lack of inclusion is because, while important, they weren't considered as important as those who made the cut. Some of the suggestions had become moot in education; other trends had been around for a while and were no longer particularly newsworthy. Regardless, they are sufficiently important to list as worthy of interest by researchers. These include competency-based education, internationalization, global competence, critical thinking and creativity, integration of technology, personalized learning approaches, social and emotional learning, overcoming the effects of colonialism, student empowerment, and learning about Indigenous peoples.

Top 10 Trends in Higher Education

#1. Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI is the #1 challenge in higher education, as it is in P-12 education. Here, the challenges are more significant. Higher education students are more knowledgeable than high schoolers and are more likely to get by with AI-enabled plagiarism. There is also a concern about faculty using AI to write journal manuscripts and how universities and journal editors should respond. I consulted with Michael Covington, Senior Research Scientist in The Institute for Artificial Intelligence at the University of Georgia, about these challenges, and he stated that the only viable way to detect plagiarism at present is to fact-check references and the text of manuscripts (thus exploiting the tendency of generative AI to fabricate information to

support its assertions). This means that editors must find at least one reviewer per submission with specific expertise in each article's core subject matter. Presently, computerized programs for detecting AI plagiarism are not able to reliably identify such problems, but that may improve with time. (For a more complete discussion of this issue, see my editorial in the second edition of *CEF*.)

As in the case of P-12 schools, however, there are benefits from AI, both in teaching and in developing answers to complex problems. AI is a blessing and a curse, as an old saying states.

#2. DEI

Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, or DEI, are under fierce attack in the U.S. and elsewhere. As of June 2024, for example, the state of Texas in the U.S. has frozen or altered 131 scholarships for minority students (The Dallas Morning News, 2024). DEI has been instrumental in helping black and brown students access university resources and be successful at largely white schools. The impact of removing DEI on minority enrollment and overall college culture remains to be seen.

#3. Student Protests

In 2024, student protests erupted on numerous college campuses in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Protesters supported one or the other side of the war. Non-participants on many of these campuses felt threatened and unsafe; classes and even graduation ceremonies were disrupted, and university buildings were occupied. It is, at this point, uncertain whether protests will resume in the fall; the dissipation of students back to their homes for summer and possible changes in political conditions in the Levant are probably determinant and currently unpredictable. For this reason, I nearly did not include protests as a trend—we do not know that they will return when school returns in the fall. However, important and inevitably long-term consequences of the protests will persist, including their impact on free speech, polarization on college campuses, and intimidation. This convinced me otherwise. These consequences are clearly trends in their own rights and are listed as such in this list. Free speech is a highly significant issue and is high on the list at #4; Politicization is #6, and intimidation is #8.

#4. Free Speech

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution enshrines a powerful belief in free speech rights, and nations around the world have embraced similar laws. The free-speech principle helps drive scholarship in higher education. Knowledge thrives in an atmosphere in which scholars can freely process information of all stripes, limited only by ethics and responsibility (scholars are unlikely to ask unsupportable and irresponsible questions such as, is intelligence genetically determined?). In recent months, however, free speech has been challenged in at least two ways. First, scholars and politicians, for example, have struggled with the question of just what speech is. Conservative lawmakers have railed against what they see as “unpatriotic” ideas being taught and discussed on university campuses and, in some cases, have banned such speech. Second, the free speech principle has, for some, become a question of whether one agrees or doesn't agree with such speech. Attacks against what one disagrees with have, at times, become vicious and even violent. This was witnessed dramatically in the Palestinian / Israeli protests on campuses across the globe. According to Eghbariah (2023), for

example, Harvard University's *Law Review* journal planned to publish a legal argument for the rights of Palestinians. The editors and author associated with a planned article were subjected to brutal doxing and even death threats, and the article was retracted. Finally, there is the very germane question of whether free speech includes hate speech; the generally accepted answer is that it does not, but hate speech is common among protestors.

#5. Evolving Student Expectations

Reports about the changing nature of students are appearing in scholarly outlets. Some report that students are increasingly resistant to reading class material, writing papers, and properly referencing claims in the papers they write (McMurtrie, 2024). Some report a higher incidence of rudeness among some students (Campbell et al., 2023). Today's students came out of the COVID-19 epidemic in their high school educational experiences, and that may affect their behaviors. These issues are separate from issues related to civil disobedience. They are culturally determined—Chinese students who are known for deference to authority would not behave this way. Nonetheless, changes in student behaviors, abilities, and preferences may be trending, and researchers would do well to keep an eye on this.

#6. Politicization of Universities

Universities, like P-12 schools, are being thrust increasingly into what is called the culture wars, or battles over right- versus left-wing conflicting perceptions and preferences for their country. These perceptions are about such things as integration, minority and women's studies, immigration, and control of women's bodies (notably abortion rights). Governments have passed legislation outlawing such things as teaching critical race theory and Black studies. Politically inspired degree programs have been implemented by politicians, ignoring the traditional hegemony of faculty over such matters. University presidents and governing boards have been forced to resign and have been replaced by politically preferred boards. Grants that provide public services deemed unacceptable by a given political party have been forced to shut down.

#7. Declining Faculty Pool

News outlets are reporting that faculty members are leaving states in which legislative bodies have enacted restraints on academic freedom, and others report that PhD graduates seeking employment are skittish about seeking employment with universities in these states. Other outlets report that PhDs are finding it more profitable and rewarding to work in businesses instead of universities.

#8. Intimidation

Intimidation has become a weapon in the politicization of universities, at least in the U.S. Faculty who take sides in the Palestinian – Israeli conflict have found themselves fired or having their contracts terminated (Hicks, 2024).

#9. Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Several respondents identified trending movements to increase interdisciplinary or even multidisciplinary collaboration. I am actually surprised that more people didn't key in on this.

In the U.S., it is not unusual for granting agencies such as the National Science Foundation to require cross-discipline support; grants for programs for curricular development, for example, may require that someone from Education be added to the team. Interdisciplinary teams have benefits in addition to their subject-matter expertise: Teams with diverse perspectives, for example, inject multiple realities into group dynamics, thus forcing the team to think outside of the limited perspective. People with leadership expertise can help manage the small group dynamics of grant teams or departmental groups. Personnel from other disciplines may bring a fresh understanding of program evaluation. There is evidence that diverse (i.e., multidisciplinary) groups are effective at fostering creativity, learning, and effectiveness (Mannix & Neale, 2005).

#10. Curricular Emphases

Several board members identified trending emphases on vocational reforms in their nations. Their governments point to a greater need for skilled workforces to support this trend. Others observe that politicians are seeking to merge research with vocational training. One respondent noted that their country wanted to stimulate creativity and innovation and was consequently emphasizing creativity, multidisciplinary research, industry-academia collaboration, and entrepreneurial behavior. These trends were specific to given countries, but their common thread involved desires to upgrade educational systems to improve their country's competitiveness or to create a citizenry that met the emerging needs of their nation.

Noteworthy But Not in the Top 10 for P-12 Education

Several trends were noteworthy but did not make it into the top 10 lists in higher education. However, we felt that the following should be mentioned: The U.S. is beginning to see graduate students and post-doctoral students seeking to unionize. We will watch this one, and it may make it to the top 10 next year. Faculty unionization was mentioned by a respondent as competency-based teaching and assessment, sustainable development goals, strengthening sector/university cooperation, dual enrollment, focus on employability skills, globalization of higher education, and demise of humanities programs. Many of these "also-rans" are specific to given countries but still constitute a trending issue in those countries; thus, they should be watched to see how they evolve.

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