



Position Paper

# The Antifragile Christian College: Turning Disruption into Advantage



Center for Academic  
Faithfulness & Flourishing

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The Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing exists to empower Christian colleges and universities to advance their faith-based missions, equip campus leaders with the resources necessary to flourish in our present age, and encourage broader support for these unique and valuable institutions. To advance this mission, CAFF seeks to accomplish three goals: (1) Reassert institutional faithfulness by developing a cohesive and credible counter-narrative to ideologies that undermine Christian higher education; (2) Redesign organizational networks by helping Christian colleges and universities cultivate ideologically aligned exchange partners; and (3) Reinvigorate institutional flourishing by designing initiatives that strengthen the governance, management, and financial position of faith-based institutions of higher education.





# The Antifragile Christian College: Turning Disruption into Advantage

**Nate Fischer**



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## Executive Summary

In recent years, American economic and social life has undergone widespread disruption and witnessed a corresponding loss of trust in institutions. In particular, three trends in the macro environment—global disruption, bureaucratic stagnation, and cultural and political alienation—threaten to upend the systems and structures upon which American higher education currently depends. This position paper reviews these trends and explains how together they are likely to produce both elevated levels of concentrated risk for universities and decreased trust in postsecondary credentialers. It concludes by exploring the implications of this foreboding reality and elucidating two divergent futures for Christian higher education: submitting to the legacy academic status hierarchy and accepting a suboptimal position, or gaining independence from these negative trends by forking away from the existing system and cultivating institutional antifragility.

## About the Author

Nate Fischer is Chief Executive Officer of New Founding, a venture organization focused on a positive alternative vision for America, and cofounder of American Reformer, a nonprofit focused on promoting a vigorous Christian approach to the cultural challenges of our day, rooted in the rich tradition of Protestant social and political thought. He previously cofounded InvestRes, a billion-dollar real estate company, and has helped launch several civic organizations, including Donum Dei Classical Academy in San Francisco. A Claremont Lincoln Fellow, his work has appeared in *Newsweek*, the *New York Post*, and *The American Mind*, among other outlets. He holds a B.A. in Economics and Political Science from Calvin University and a J.D. from Harvard Law School.

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## Director's Preface

Christian higher education is composed of distinctive institutions committed to particular values that differentiate them from their postsecondary peers. Moreover, the Christian college's unique institutional character has often been viewed as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this character provides contrast with dominant models, thereby enabling the Christian college to stand out in a crowded market and serve a narrower niche. On the other hand, this character grounds the Christian college in a particular set of commitments that pervade the institution, such that it is difficult for the organization to adapt to changing conditions. For this reason, conventional wisdom has extolled the benefits of rounding off the edges of institutional distinctiveness whenever possible in order to appeal to a wider pool of prospective students. But what if external conditions changed so fundamentally that conventional wisdom was turned on its head? What if the key to survival in today's market is actually to redouble institutional commitment to—and expression of—Christian mission and identity?

In the following pages, Nate Fischer describes how three macro trends—global disruption, bureaucratic stagnation, and cultural and political alienation—have conspired to undermine existing models within American higher education. Consequently, he argues, colleges and universities will simultaneously experience both an increase in concentrated risk and a decrease in industry credibility. In this environment, Christian colleges that remain within the legacy academic status hierarchy are likely to experience suboptimal market positioning, early

impacts of emergent financial crises, and mounting pressures to conform to external demands for institutional compromise. Fischer concludes by casting vision for an alternative future that follows a path of independence, one that provides a durable base for demand, a reduced cost structure, and potential upside from external chaos.

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### What if the key to survival in today's market is actually to redouble institutional commitment to—and expression of—Christian mission and identity?

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As institutional leaders consider the implications of recent social, cultural, and economic disruptions for the future of Christian higher education, many will be tempted to seek safety in familiarity by sticking to formulas that worked in the past. Fischer invites the reader to consider a different approach, one that cultivates antifragility and empowers Christian colleges to turn disruptions into institutional advantages. Those willing to blaze this new trail will be positioned to move beyond survival to flourishing.

**P. Jesse Rine, Ph.D.**

*Executive Director*

Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing  
Greenville, SC

June 2024



## Introduction: The Antifragile Christian College

**A**merican economic and social life is experiencing widespread disruption across multiple dimensions, as well as an ever-deepening loss of trust in institutions.<sup>1</sup> Most of our nation's universities are precariously situated at the epicenter of the very systems and hierarchies now facing disruption and thus are vulnerable to impending tremors and aftershocks. And this is particularly true for Christian colleges and universities, which lack many of the "safety features," like large endowments and/or

significant government subsidies, that shield elite private and public institutions of higher education. Christian colleges and universities are also already on the margins of established values, creating greater susceptibility to further ostracism by legacy institutions.

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**Antifragile organizations do more than just endure adversity; they advance because of it.**

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<sup>1</sup> Just two years ago, Gallup reported significant declines for 11 of the 16 major U.S. institutions examined, including all-time lows for the U.S. Supreme Court, the American Presidency, and the U.S. Congress, as well as 30-year lows for the church or organized religion, newspapers, the criminal justice system, big business, and the police (Jeffrey M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low," July 5, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx>).



But this peripheral position, though a site of intense vulnerability, can also become a generator of dynamic potential. The very features that leave Christian colleges exposed to the impending losses of the higher education establishment also make them well suited to set out in a new and more promising direction. In order to achieve this, Christian colleges must have as their aim not merely survival, but antifragility. Antifragile organizations do more than just endure adversity; they advance because of it.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> For more on antifragility, see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2014). Taleb illustrates the concept by contrasting two ready-to-mail packages, one marked “fragile,” and the other “antifragile.” An antifragile package’s “contents would not just be unbreakable, but would benefit from shocks and a wide array of trauma.” This is distinct from a package with merely “robust” or “resilient” contents, which, at best, would be “unharmd” by adverse treatment (32).



## The Macro Environment

**T**hree interrelated macro trends threaten dominant twentieth-century norms and promise to put growing pressure on most legacy institutions—especially in the higher education sector. Understanding these trends is the first step toward envisioning a true, positive alternative—one Christian colleges could be uniquely poised to pursue.

Each of these themes touches a key contemporary problem, and each reflects a pervasive underlying ideology. Together, they contribute to the emerging breakdown in societal trust and order. Likewise, three

corresponding solutions help define a positive future. While many emphasize only one or two of these problems and/or solutions, the three trends are deeply linked, such that successful responses will often require addressing all three.

### Global Disruption

The first trend springs from the ideology of globalism, which promotes maximal cooperation and exchange across international borders.<sup>3</sup> Captivated by globalism's promises of unending growth, leaders in all segments of society have pursued connection with and dependence on distant counterparties.

<sup>3</sup> See Gavin Kitching, "Globalism and Globalization," *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology, and Ethics*, vol. 2, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/globalism-and-globalization>.

Aided by advances in digital communication and intercontinental transportation, the decades surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union saw an unprecedented growth of political openness, information flow, and global trade. But as competition with China escalates, wars emerge in Europe and the Near East, and militias threaten trade routes with weapons that impose asymmetric costs, there is a rising awareness of the risks of such a system and the fragility inherent in any sort of external or distant dependency.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, contrary to globalism's idealistic rhetoric, processes of globalization often bring about a tragedy of the commons, where benefits that could be shared by all—for the good of all—are instead dominated by a self-interested few. This occurs when tightly aligned groups who are less focused on altruistic ideals politically outmaneuver those who are committed to the universalism necessary to sustain a global market.<sup>5</sup>

The solution to the growing risks of global dependencies is household, community, regional, and national self-determination—a fractal<sup>6</sup> approach that recognizes outside connections will remain but systematically

favors local interactions when feasible. Successful organizations will facilitate such interactions, whether focused on a geographic place or an aligned community, and will leverage existing local networks or enable new connections rather than defaulting to the distant and anonymous.

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### **Bureaucratic Stagnation**

Managerialism—the push to professionalize, rationalize, commoditize, and objectively measure every process and organization—has redefined the structure of our society over the past century.<sup>7</sup> This process enables scale, a direct complement to globalization.

<sup>4</sup> For more on risks inherent in the global economy, see Indermit Gill and M. Ayhan Kose, “5 Major Risks Confronting the Global Economy in 2024,” Brookings, January 17, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/5-risks-global-economy-2024/>.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this concept with examples, see Alexandra Spiliakos, “Tragedy of the Commons: What It Is and 5 Examples,” Harvard Business School Online, February 6, 2019, <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/tragedy-of-the-commons-impact-on-sustainability-issues>.

<sup>6</sup> Arindam Bhattacharya, Nikolaus Lang, Sharad Verma, and Hans-Paul Bürkner note that “fractal companies create customer solutions that are localized, customized, and even personalized” (“Why Global Companies Need to Become Fractal Innovators,” Boston Consulting Group, January 25, 2023, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/why-global-companies-should-implement-fractals-in-business>). For more on the contrast between scale-driven organizations and fractal organizations, see Arindam Bhattacharya, Hans-Paul Bürkner, Allison Bailey, and Sharad Verma, “The Organization of the Future Is Fractal,” Boston Consulting Group, May 31, 2022, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2022/fractal-companies-are-the-organizations-of-the-future>. See also Taleb, *Antifragile*, 70–71, 324–325.

<sup>7</sup> James Burnham's influential work *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World* explores the displacement of capitalism by administrative managerialism. A helpful overview of Burnham's thought is provided by Julius Krein, “James Burnham's Managerial Elite,” *American Affairs* (Spring 2017), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/02/james-burnhams-managerial-elite/>.

But it also comes at a cost: bureaucratic impediments to decision-making, accountability, and innovation; rationalized processes that feel cold and sterile; commoditization that forces conformity and destroys variety. And it has led to ever-expanding organizational bloat, with outsized growth of administrative jobs in domains from finance to education, and the entrenchment of compliance-focused departments like Human Resources in every sector.

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**The answer is multifaceted but has a single aim: the elevation of the human spirit, even in a complex world.**

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The answer is multifaceted but has a single aim: the elevation of the human spirit, even in a complex world. This involves exploring new frontiers and employing organizational models that are more dependent on participant ownership and skin in the game than a rote series of bureaucratic checks.<sup>8</sup> Startups inherently tend in this direction, because startups typically remain controlled by and dependent on an entrepreneurial leader, and their mission to address a pressing need requires creativity rather than bureaucratic approaches.<sup>9</sup> Startups whose products empower decision-makers in complex environments—as opposed

to those that abrogate human decision-making through hard-coded processes—will see particular appeal. Developments in AI will offer notable contrasts between tools that automate oversight mechanisms to allow the expansion of bureaucratic governance and those that automate creative functions to give leverage to individuals.

**Cultural and Political Alienation**

In the past decade, cultural conflicts have encompassed every kind of institution and all areas of American life. Practices and traditions that were once widely accepted have been persistently attacked and deconstructed by ideological narratives—such as DEI and CRT—grounded in radical liberation and egalitarianism. While many see these as irrelevant “politics” that are bolted on to otherwise-neutral businesses, they in fact complement globalism and managerialism.

For instance, these ideologies help strip people of familial and cultural attachments, which renders them more malleable and predictable participants in global bureaucracies while offering them a comfortable moral framework that more fully embeds them in such careers. This detachment from traditional connections has driven wholesale corporate embrace of these ideologies, resulting in alienation for millions of Americans.

<sup>8</sup> As I argue elsewhere, participant ownership “embraces human judgment,” while “having skin in the game ensures that decision-makers share in the consequences of their actions.” See Nate Fischer, “Meritocracy Must Not Be Our Goal,” *The American Mind*, February 16, 2024, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/meritocracy-must-not-be-our-goal/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Thiel, with Blake Masters, *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future* (New York: Random House, 2014), 10, 109–113.



The solution is a renewed embrace of the American tradition and Christian ideals. This means a recognition that these are good things, worthy of protection and celebration, that have laid the foundation for human flourishing. For many businesses and institutions, this embrace will take the form of a proactive focus on marketing to and serving individuals and communities who still identify with these values. Organizations that follow this path can expect to both receive and provide tangible benefits. On the one hand, they are likely to realize the short-term opportunity of acquiring customers who have been alienated by competitors that suffered ideological capture. On the other hand, in order to truly serve this constituency, they

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will necessarily focus on real problems and produce valuable, durable solutions that ultimately benefit society as a whole.





## The Impact on Higher Education

**T**he impact of global disruption, bureaucratic stagnation, and cultural and political alienation on higher education will be stark. Each of these three macro trends directly touches colleges and universities in a significant way, and together they threaten the standing of the existing system in which these institutions play a central role. Working in concert, the primary effect of these three trends for higher education will be twofold: an increase in concentrated risk and a decrease in industry credibility.

### Concentration of Risk in Higher Education

Systems of higher education are singularly vulnerable to the aforementioned trends and as such will be subject to elevated levels of concentrated risk.

For instance, the apparent boon of globalization, as expressed in intellectual, cultural, and economic exchange across international boundaries, can quickly morph into liability as geopolitical realities undergo sharp and sudden shifts. Colleges and universities typically employ financial models with high fixed cost structures. This is due largely to their extensive investment in instructional personnel and campus enhancements, as required by the dominant

residential approach to higher education. Although this investment is often viewed as promoting educational quality, the resulting high fixed cost structure makes it difficult for colleges and universities to adjust to unexpected or severe revenue drops such as those associated with global volatility.

In order to increase tuition revenue, many colleges have enrolled significant numbers of international students, who often pay higher tuition than domestic students.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the financial significance of international student enrollment looms even larger than their absolute numbers. Any shock to this international demand—such as from rising tensions with China—could have an adverse impact on the viability of many American colleges and universities. Even domestically, the trend toward broader markets for both applicants and job placement has led (or pushed) most colleges into national competition characterized by standardization and ruthlessly competitive ranking systems like the *U.S. News Best Colleges* guide. Such national competition means that some lower-ranked schools may experience concentrated impacts of market disruptions beyond their geographic region.

Colleges and universities also play a central role in bureaucratic management models by providing the programs that prepare

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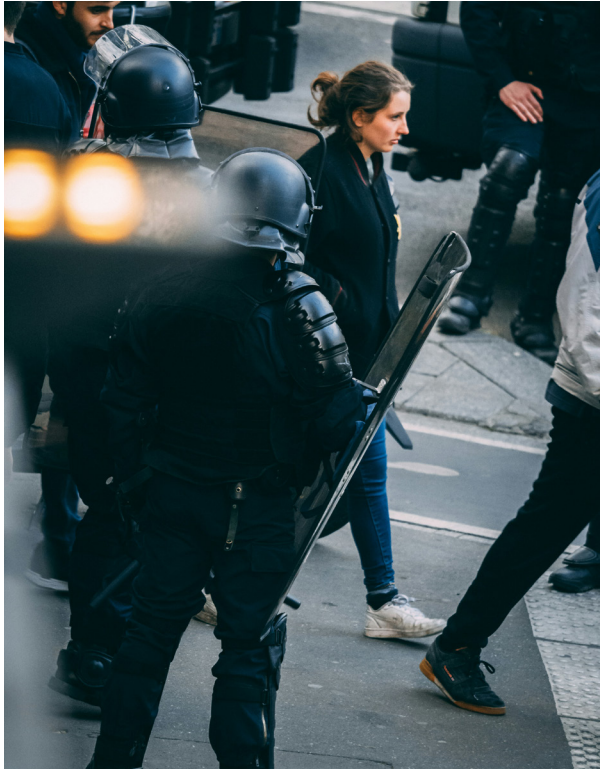
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people for such careers and by selling the credentials that establish and reflect the broader credibility of this system. As people recognize and push back on the limits of such systems, the multi-decade expansion of demand for university credentials may reverse.

Hits to the credibility of the entire system threaten to tarnish the prestige of American higher education writ large and damage the brands of even those institutions avoiding direct controversy. When the public consciousness is dominated by questions about the useful skills and tangible outcomes generated by certain academic disciplines and programs, concerns over administrative bloat and skyrocketing college costs, and disbelief over widespread plagiarism among the leaders of so-called best-in-class institutions, all colleges and universities operating within the legacy

<sup>10</sup> The proportion of international students enrolled in U.S. institutions tripled from 1954 to 2004, with the raw number increasing from 35,232 to 572,509, per Charles E. Phelps, “Globalization of Higher Education,” TIAA Institute: Advancing Higher Education, 2007, <https://www.tiaa.org/content/dam/tiaa/institute/pdf/full-report/2017-02/inst-advancing-higher-ed-phelps-112707.pdf>. International students sometimes pay “two or three times as much” as domestic students, per Omar Duwaji’s interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reporter Karin Fischer, “High Fees Paid by International Students Help U.S. Universities Balance Their Books,” *The World*, March 28, 2024, <https://theworld.org/stories/2024/03/28/high-fees-paid-international-students-help-us-universities-balance-their-books>. See also Tanza Loudonback, “International Students Are Now ‘Subsidizing’ Public American Universities to the Tune of \$9 Billion a Year,” *Business Insider*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/foreign-students-pay-up-to-three-times-as-much-for-tuition-at-us-public-colleges-2016-9>.





system can suffer from negative perceptions that attach to the industry as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, colleges and universities are at the center of the cultural battles that have roiled American society. This is nothing new—they were prominent battlegrounds in the 1960s and 1970s, and even earlier—but their near-total capture by the ideological left in recent decades, combined with a growing awareness of and reaction against such

institutional capture by those on the right in recent years, elevates the significance of this dynamic. On-campus responses to the October 7 Hamas attacks illustrate the degree of radical leftist ideology embedded within many institutions, and the sharp pushback highlights the consequences that can result for colleges and universities. Moreover, higher education has also become ground zero for battles over DEI and affirmative action, with the *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard* Supreme Court decision making clear the significance of the university as a site of cultural contestation. In this highly politicized environment, two consequential constituencies—donors and legislators—are more likely to wade into controversies and seek a specific policy or outcome.<sup>12</sup>

### Credentialers and a Collapse in Trust

In addition to increasing concentrated risk for institutions of higher education, all three of the aforementioned macro trends are also fueling the ongoing collapse of societal and institutional trust. And universities are uniquely affected by this loss of trust, for they have long played a central role in the broader systems and underlying status hierarchy that serve as a bedrock of trust in our society.

<sup>11</sup> According to a report by Pew Research Center, “even as many college graduates view their own educational experience in positive terms, the public as a whole—including a substantial share of college graduates—expresses reservations about the extent to which various higher education institutions prepare students for the workforce more generally. Just 16% of Americans think that a four-year degree prepares students very well for a well-paying job in today’s economy, and 51% say this type of degree prepares students ‘somewhat well’ for the workplace” (“The State of American Jobs,” October 6, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/10/06/5-the-value-of-a-college-education/>). Americans’ overall confidence in higher education has fallen from 57% in 2015 to only 36% in 2023 (Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply,” Gallup, July 11, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>).

<sup>12</sup> Although state and federal legislators have long provided oversight for American higher education, the rise of punitive activism among high-profile major donors is a new development. See Lila Corwin Berman and Benjamin Soskis, “The Dangers of Donor Revolt,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 13, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-dangers-of-donor-revolt>.



As credentialers, colleges and universities are, effectively, leveraged mediators of trust. They both build and buy their own credibility and that of the broader higher education systems in which they operate. In turn, they sell their own endorsements in the form of credentials—both formal degrees and other types of approval or association. Such a model relies on sustained confidence upheld by multiple parties; in the most notable, the perception that a degree will open desirable job opportunities attracts high-caliber applicants, while the perception that an institution enrolls high-caliber students attracts top employers.

When all parties maintain the requisite level of confidence in higher education, colleges and universities are able to transact on this trust. However, when confidence drops among key constituents within the system, individual institutions may experience difficulty in serving as effective mediators of trust. For example, if competitive employers suspect a decline in student quality at a certain college or university—or question whether the acquisition of a degree is a reliable signal of professional competence—they may scale back or even cease recruiting there. If high-quality high schoolers sense that a college or university's ability to deliver top job opportunities is slipping, they may look

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elsewhere for a better value proposition. Once a loss of credibility becomes widespread, its pernicious effects can rapidly compound. For example, if employers and students begin to lose confidence in higher education as a whole, some may explore alternative sources for building and verifying human capital. These dynamics could theoretically lead to a spiraling loss of confidence—not unlike a bank run.

Even if a college or university can avoid this kind of spiral by relying on established applicant pipelines and employer relationships—a durable local network effect of sorts—any blow to its prestige may immediately impair the premium people will pay for association with it. This may be most directly reflected in another key revenue stream—charitable donations—which are highly sensitive to brand, prestige, and perceived trajectory. In short, both the overall viability and the financial strength of an institution may suffer compounded harm due to higher education's unique role in credentialing amid a society that is recalibrating how it assesses credibility.



## The Choice for Christian Colleges

**C**hristian colleges face a stark choice. This is not a choice between the status quo and excellence or between fitting in with peers and standing out. Rather, for many, it is a choice between likely ruin and likely ascent. This is why those who lead Christian colleges must decide: will they take the path of submission or the path of independence?

### The Path of Submission

On the one hand, submission to the legacy academic status hierarchy will sentence

most Christian colleges and universities to a middling fate—no matter what they do. This is a simple matter of position: most are less selective in their admissions and receive lower scores from *U.S. News Best Colleges* and other ranking guides. As the mainstream stance toward Christianity grows more negative, this suboptimal positioning within the legacy status hierarchy will worsen.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that any college or university that maintains even a vestige of orthodoxy will face discrimination within the broader academy, affecting everything from peer review of faculty scholarship to placement rates in

<sup>13</sup> For additional information about the concept of the Negative World, see Aaron Renn, “The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,” *First Things*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>.

competitive graduate programs.<sup>14</sup> And, more saliently for the long-term employment of graduates, companies dominated by anti-Christian values may regard a degree from a Christian college as a liability for hiring.

Moreover, Christian colleges and universities, like most low-ranked private institutions, are likely to be among the first places to face emerging financial crises within the industry. Institutions within this sector of American higher education tend to be highly dependent on tuition and more expensive than most public alternatives.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, many Christian colleges and universities who remain within the existing status hierarchy will offer a precarious value proposition to the very people on whom they depend for financial stability—namely, prospective students. Under this arrangement, episodes of institutional distress are inevitable.

As America enters the Negative World—an emergent reality wherein Christianity is an increasingly stigmatized identity for both persons and institutions—Christian colleges and universities are likely to face mounting pressures to conform to external demands.<sup>16</sup> Many of these demands would move Christian colleges and universities away from their founding missions. To wit, the compromises needed to maintain any sort of acceptance in the legacy academic system would threaten to destroy what makes them attractive as Christian institutions

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in the first place, thereby alienating both donor and enrollment prospects and compounding existing financial challenges.

### The Path of Independence

The alternative is to fork away from this legacy academic status hierarchy. Christian colleges and universities are well suited to take a different path. An analysis of how these institutions are able to respond to the three macro trends in ways that align with the solutions suggested above will demonstrate the desirability of this alternative.

As global markets face disruption, Christian colleges and universities have natural constituencies—the communities and denominations traditionally associated with the institution—within which to focus recruiting (and perhaps job placement) efforts. By doing so, they help these communities build economic self-determination. Such self-determination can be applied to academic standards too: Christian colleges and universities have independent standards—God’s Word, the Christian intellectual

<sup>14</sup> See P. Jesse Rine, *Meeting the Moment: Reconstituting Christian Higher Education for a New Era* (Greenville, SC: Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing, 2024), <https://whitepapers.faithfulcolleges.org/Meeting-The-Moment-Reconstituting-Christian-Higher-Education-For-A-New-Era.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> See P. Jesse Rine and David S. Guthrie, “Steering the Ship Through Uncertain Waters: Empirical Analysis and the Future of Evangelical Higher Education,” *Christian Higher Education* 15, no. 1–2 (2016): 4–23.

<sup>16</sup> See Aaron Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024).

tradition, and rich denominational/theological resources—to which they may anchor, thus freeing themselves from the pressure to bow to increasingly destructive academic fads that a dependence on outside academic hierarchies may impose.

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### **Christian colleges and universities willing to fork away from the herd will be positioned to lead such reforms.**

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As bureaucratic institutions lose credibility, Christian institutions of higher education can develop a lean model that doubles down on the essential elements of a college instead of employing an excessive administrative apparatus and ever-expanding array of academic departments. Such focus offers motivated students an education that is both cost-effective and centered on the core—and largely timeless—skills and traits a college is best equipped to cultivate. Christian colleges and universities willing to fork away from the herd will be positioned to lead such reforms because they will not be captive to the constituencies that demand superfluous administrators and academic departments.<sup>17</sup>

As millions of Americans feel cultural and political alienation—often particularly acute with respect to educational institutions—Christian colleges and universities can offer parents and students a sharply different option. By confidently embracing Christian values and celebrating what is praiseworthy in the American tradition, these colleges can become islands people seek out as they grow disillusioned with many other institutions in their lives. As higher education’s credibility crisis worsens, Christian colleges and universities that make such a move are likely to attract applicants far beyond their traditional constituencies.

In all of these responses, Christian colleges and universities have some unique advantages that position them to diverge from broader negative trends in higher education. The first response provides a durable base for demand and the second a reduced cost structure; together, these help render an institution financially resilient. The third positions the institution as a haven from broader societal alienation, creating potential upside from external chaos that allows the move to antifragility.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> What counts as “superfluous” is a function of two things—market demand and an institution’s particular specialization(s)—such that this analysis becomes a key strategic decision for campus leaders. For more on the forking strategy, see Nathaniel Fischer, “To Survive in Higher Ed, Break from the Woke Herd,” *The American Mind*, July 6, 2020, <https://americanmind.org/features/american-education/higher-ed-conformism-is-a-waste-of-money/>.

<sup>18</sup> One prominent example of an institution reaping enrollment benefits as a result of forking away from the legacy academic status hierarchy is Hillsdale College. See Samuel Dodge, “While Other Schools Struggle, Hillsdale College Enrollment Has Surged during COVID-19. Here’s Why,” *MLive*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.mlive.com/news/jackson/2022/04/hillsdale-college-enrollment-surged-during-covid-19-heres-why.html>.





## Rising above the Chaos

**T**he macro trends of growing global disruption, bureaucratic stagnation, and political and cultural alienation will continue to reshape American society and contribute to a broad loss of institutional and societal trust. The impact will be especially pronounced in the academy because of the pivotal yet increasingly precarious role universities play in the current system. To survive this period of uncertainty and chaos, colleges and universities will need to cultivate institutional antifragility.

Cultivating antifragility entails more than just one-off acts of resistance to unqualified globalization, excessive managerialism, or organizational wokeness. In moments of

personal or professional clarity, many have rightfully chosen to oppose one of these three trends in isolation: some herald their “anti-woke” commitments, while others champion the local (i.e., “Made in America,” “Buy Local”) or counteract bureaucracy by choosing humanizing approaches. But such hyper-focused attempts to redress a single symptom of cultural decline, while laudatory to some degree, ultimately fail to address the interlocking dynamics that bind these trends to one another and make them mutually reinforcing. While narrowly focused responses may have an ameliorating effect in the short-term, they can also leave in place underlying values and incentives that keep an institution’s path largely unchanged.

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**To survive this period of uncertainty and chaos, colleges and universities will need to cultivate institutional antifragility.**

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Christian institutions face a consequential choice. On the one hand, they can submit to the demands of the broader academic status hierarchy. This decision will mean Christian colleges and universities face increasing: (a) institutional vulnerability because of their poor positioning within this broader hierarchy, (b) financial challenges because of their tuition dependence, and (c) pressure to abandon traditional distinctives from a system that is more hostile to Christianity. On the other hand, these institutions can fork away from this mainstream higher education model by building around alternative networks and pioneering alternative models.<sup>19</sup> This approach can help Christian colleges and universities gain independence from and protection against these macro threats *and* realize the potential for significant upside by providing something increasingly scarce and sought after: an affordable, high-quality education that prepares students for—and connects them to—meaningful work. 🏰




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<sup>19</sup> The Lindy principle, which states that the expected future life of a nonperishable phenomenon is proportional to its current age, suggests that the older surviving parts of the American academy likely represent timeless values. In many cases, therefore, embracing alternative models will simply mean returning to an older form of education inherent in a college's historic character. For more on the Lindy principle, see chapter 20 of Taleb, *Antifragile*, as well as chapter 9 of his *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life* (New York: Random House, 2018).



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P.O. Box 3706 | Greenville, SC 29608