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President Georgia Nugent on the Closure of Lincoln Community College

Charlie Schlenker
WGLT Radio, Illinois State University

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WGLT Interview with Georgia Nugent, April 11, 2022

Jon Norton: You're listing to WGLT's sound ideas. The president of Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington says the closure of Lincoln College is an example of this challenging time in higher education. Georgia Nugent used to work at the council of independent colleges that tracks issues facing largely private liberal arts colleges. Sixty colleges have closed or consolidated since 2016 and this interview with WGLT's Charlie Schlenker, Nugent says that number is significant but perhaps misleading.

Georgia Nugent: Over about the last 50 years I think every year about ten colleges close. Actually it's not that shocking this has been a pattern for a long time and colleges open every year. I do think in the higher education, national and federal data that we rely on does tend to lag by a year or two and obviously, a lot has been happening in the last year or two. But, I think we are seeing a pretty consistent pattern. There was some data, I believe I saw this in the national clearing house data, showing a map of the United States and what college closures there have been uh in recent years from zero to nine, the most in any state was about 9. Illinois interestingly is right up there. There are 17 states that have no closures what so ever, Illinois has had 6 so were on the high end.

Charkie Schlenker: If enrollment is local and if enrollment is the key variable for college success uh then the Midwest must be taking it on the chin.

Nugent: The Midwest is. Yeah. Uh particularly in the Midwest, also in the northeast. The demographics just show the population that will be graduating from high school is going to decline pretty dramatically and were in the midst of that now. That decline will last til about 2029.

Schlenker: Since your saying the closures have been largely steady although pandemic data hasn't quite filtered into this mix yet, do you expect the pandemic to accelerate the closures or to weaken some institutions so that they will close down the road.

Nugent: I would guess that we are going to see some more closures, one thing that has certainly increased in recent years is mergers. Where one college is taken over by another. Some of them quite surprising, for example, there was a small California college Mills, North Eastern in Boston is taking over. There are several widely geographical institutions that are merging and in a number of cases you have more typical a larger college in a region assuming a smaller college. That's been happening for example with some um arts colleges taken over by more general colleges. So I think we'll see the merger trend increasing.

Schlenker: That will save on administrative costs but not necessarily infrastructure costs. If you still want to have a foot print in a given community--

Nugent: Right

Schlenker:-- how much help are mergers?

Nugent: I think it remains to be seen how they'll work. Uh there have certainly been some that are around that have been around now for five years or so that have been fine. But, I don't think we have enough of a track record yet to see exactly what will happen. You know I think we are in a very fluid moment in higher education and I think what none of us can predict with clarity yet is how the pivoting

to online education that virtually everyone did, how that's going to effect the long term. You know, I think what we may end up seeing Charlie is not so much closure and transformation which colleges were never intending to go into online education in a very large way. I think many of those will begin to become more hybrid. I think we are seeing in our student population many of them want to be on campus they want to be in a residential institution but at the same time, they love the flexibility that came with online learning. So, I think what we're going to see is just a change in the delivery of education in colleges that remain open and that remain residential.

Schlenker: Is online delivery expensive enough to put smaller institutions at a disadvantage as they work up that infrastructure.

Nugent: Could be, it kind of depends on the level you're trying to obtain. You know, you could do a very simple delivery online, you and I are doing it now (laughs) you know. Or you can have bells and whistles that are much more sophisticated and some that can be outsourced uh companies that specialize in it but for a relatively hefty fee so we'll have to see how that goes.

Norton: That's Illinois Wesleyan University president Georgia Nugent, who says a couple of things might reduce the impact of the enrollment cliff. Families of students of under represented groups tend to value higher education more than whites, so as that population of the college grows they might disproportionately attend college and many colleges are starting new lines of business for adult learners by capitalizing on remote teaching. Nugent spoke with WGLT's Charlie Schlenker.