



A Symposium on



Universities at a Crossroads: Challenges and Opportunities

Organized by: The Athens Institute

Place: 5th Floor, 9 Chalkokondili Street, Athens.

Date: Tuesday, 5 May 2026

Time: 13:30-15:00

P R O G R A M

Moderator TBA

Speakers:

1. **Parisa Gazerani**, Professor, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. **Title:** *Rethinking Universities in an Era of Complexity.*
2. **Gary Comstock**, Alumni Association Distinguished Undergraduate Professor of Philosophy, North Carolina State University, USA. **Title:** *Teaching Americans to Think: One \$4 Million Bet on Civil Discourse.*
3. **Mitzi Brammer**, Associate Professor, Saint Louis University, USA. **Title:** *Using Student Portfolios for Summative Assessments.*
4. **Palle Larsen**, Senior Researcher, UCL University College, Denmark. **Title:** *Navigating Complexity: Challenges and Opportunities for Universities in an AI-Driven Era.* ([summary](#))
5. **Rick Vanderlee**, Full Professor, Nipissing University, Canada. **Title:** *At the Crossroads: What a Small Northern University in Canada Can Teach Us About the Future of Higher Education.* ([summary](#))

Discussion

Note: The working language of the symposium will be English. If you are interested in participating, please contact Celia Sakka at info@atiner.gr or by phone at +30 210 3634210.

.....

Summaries

Palle Larsen: Universities face a complex and evolving pressure landscape, balancing demands for research excellence, high-quality teaching, societal impact, financial stability, and rapid digital transformation. Increasingly competitive funding systems and administrative requirements are reshaping research priorities, raising concerns about academic autonomy and the sustainability of long-term knowledge creation. At the same time, teaching is being transformed by AI, as student expectations shift and institutions must ensure meaningful learning while safeguarding academic integrity. Expanding governance and regulatory frameworks further challenge universities' ability to act strategically and maintain a clear mission. Despite these pressures, emerging opportunities exist: when implemented thoughtfully, AI can enhance research innovation, support interdisciplinary collaboration, and improve administrative efficiency, provided universities retain strong institutional direction and control.

Rick Vanderlee: The presentation will use Nipissing University (in Ontario, Canada) as a lens to explore one of the defining challenges in Canadian higher education today: how smaller regional universities can sustain quality, relevance, and identity amid financial pressure, demographic change, and the growing influence of artificial intelligence. I will reflect on what these pressures reveal about the future of teaching, institutional mission, and student support. I will also argue that small northern universities are not simply adapting to change; they may be showing the wider sector a more human and responsive path forward. What small universities may be teaching the sector is that the future of higher education is not only about digital adaptation or financial survival. It is also about preserving a form of university life that is more relational, more place-conscious, and more accountable to students and communities. In that sense, smaller institutions may not be behind the sector. They may, in some ways, be pointing it in the right direction.