

HOW STATE POLICYMAKERS CAN STRENGTHEN HIGHER EDUCATION

A CALL TO ACTION

Higher education across the nation is under scrutiny. Publicly-funded colleges and universities are particularly vulnerable, as they represent a massive public investment by state taxpayers. Many concerned Americans have begun to question the return on this investment, and public confidence in higher education has fallen every year since 2015. The diversity of institutions means that no single policy can apply everywhere. State legislators must work together with trustees and local stakeholders to assess the issues their public colleges and universities are facing.

Below are steps that state policymakers have taken to strengthen higher education, adopting policies that support trustees and lead institutions to better outcomes for students, taxpayers, and the nation.

Control costs through accountability.

The financial burden placed on students attempting to complete their college education is simply unsustainable. Students at four-year public institutions pay an average of 231% more than they did 30 years ago. At the same time, spending on construction has reached record highs, with 21 million square feet of new space added in 2016 alone. Trustees and policymakers must come together and address this crisis by ensuring that our institutions are not squandering the public and private funds that support higher education.

Louisiana recognized this fact in 2016 when legislators unanimously passed an act which required governing boards to study and report classroom usage rates by day of week and time of day. By undertaking this survey before any proposed building project, trustees will have the information they need to make informed decisions that help safeguard their institution's financial future.

Protect the rights of students and teachers.

America's colleges and universities occupy a unique space in our culture. As institutions tasked with educating the next generation of citizens, leaders, and innovators, their mission is inextricably tied to the principles of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas. Despite this, the past few years have seen an unprecedented rise in the use of speech codes that suppress minority viewpoints, coercive tactics to silence speakers, and administrative capitulation in the face of pressure from activists to "disinvite" unpopular speakers.

In the face of these troubling trends, the South Dakota State Legislature passed an act in 2019 to "promote free speech and intellectual diversity" at public institutions of higher education. Legislators joined with the state's Board of Regents in a collaborative effort to protect the rights of students and teachers to exchange ideas freely while respecting institutional mission and the role of the Regents.

Increase oversight by supporting trustees as informed and active fiduciaries.

The ultimate authority at any institution of higher education rests with the governing boards of trustees. If trustees are to be thoughtful overseers, they need to be informed about their role, higher education issues generally, and the particular challenges facing their states and their institutions. All too often, trustees lack the support they need to be effective stewards.

Virginia's legislators made progress in confronting this issue by giving trustees an active role in their own education, mandating that the board design and attend training programs which "address the role, duties, and responsibilities of the governing boards." This law has had bipartisan popularity, with a 2019 amendment passing unanimously.

Give graduates the tools they need to be informed citizens.

Public confidence in America's political processes and institutions is at an all-time low, and partisan polarization has crippled our public discourse. Rather than combat these issues, many schools seem all too willing to retreat from their responsibility to develop informed citizens. A 2019 ACTA study of over 1,100 four-year institutions showed that only 18% required a foundational survey course in U.S. Government or History.

Several states—Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia, and Nevada, among others—have passed laws mandating that students at public institutions study America's history and government. California recognizes the connection between civic education and political participation, and aims to provide students with an understanding of "American democracy and of the society in which they live to enable them to contribute to that society as responsible and constructive citizens."