



Ohio Higher Education at a Crossroads

Federal Cuts, State Disinvestment, and the Path Forward

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The Current Federal Policy Landscape Will Force Ohio to Make Difficult Decisions

The beginning of the fall semester is a traditional marker of a new chapter for students across the country. For 2026, the fall semester is also the marker of a new reality for states and the American postsecondary education as they navigate the sweeping policy changes brought through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) of 2025.

Ohio exemplifies this challenging environment. The state has 14 public universities and 22 public community colleges that enrolled roughly 78 percent of all Ohio college students for the 2025 fall semester,¹ along with multiple private institutions of esteemed reputation. Ohio's education system is also notable because of how it shapes the state workforce. 68 percent of the state's college educated workforce both attended college and still work in Ohio, which is thirteen points higher than the national average and tied for the second-highest rate with Oklahoma and Alabama.²

H.R.1 included several sweeping changes that will both directly and indirectly shape higher education in the years to come. The bill restricts eligibility for Pell Grants³ and places new caps on federal student loan borrowing,⁴ raising student loan payments for current and future borrowers and increasing how much former borrowers, who had received income-driven repayment forgiveness, owe in taxes.⁵ These changes will make repayment and financial stability more difficult for the almost 429,000 student loan borrowers in default in Ohio as of 2025, nearly 41 percent of whom entered default that year.⁶ Black borrowers, nationally and specifically within Ohio, are also at disproportionate risk of losing critical lifelines to finance their educational pathways.⁷

On top of the direct higher education changes, H.R.1 made the largest cuts to health care and food assistance in the country's history: \$793 billion in Medicaid, \$268 billion in Affordable Care Act spending, and over \$200 billion in SNAP. These cuts, as well as draconian eligibility restrictions for several other federal basic needs programs, increase the pressure on states, which must find ways to fund these programs out of their own budgets while also navigating their own pre-existing financial constraints.⁸ Ohio will have to find a way to fund health care for the projected 438,000 residents who will lose coverage by 2034 (a \$33 billion loss in Medicaid funding) and spend \$388 million per year just to maintain current SNAP levels and protect as many of the projected 717,000 families that will lose at least partial benefits as possible.⁹ These cuts could also reduce future enrollment rates in higher education, as students may not be able to afford out-of-pocket expenses like housing, transportation, and child care, no matter how much financial aid they receive to cover direct educational expenses.

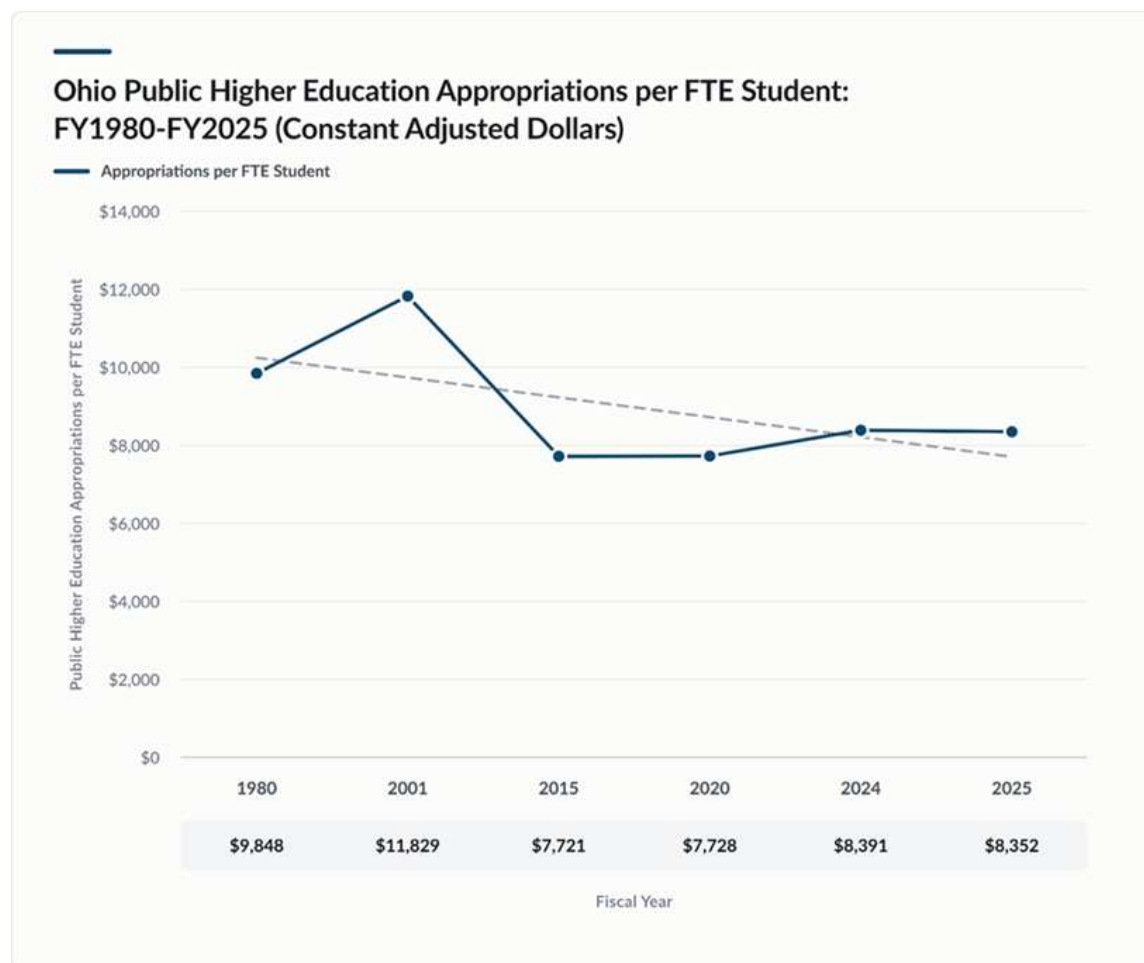
Under the Trump Administration, the executive branch has pushed drastic higher education policy changes that have destabilized the entire education system. The U.S. Department of Education has endured repeated waves of mass layoffs and had several of its offices illegally transferred to other federal departments.¹⁰ Federal civil rights enforcement in education has been effectively halted,¹¹ and what remains of the Office for Civil Rights has been expressly used to exacerbate discrimination against marginalized students.¹² Not content with Congressional

cuts to higher education funding, the administration has also repeatedly suspended federal funding for universities it has deemed as insufficiently supportive of its policy agenda and made multiple efforts to revoke the visas of protesting students.¹³

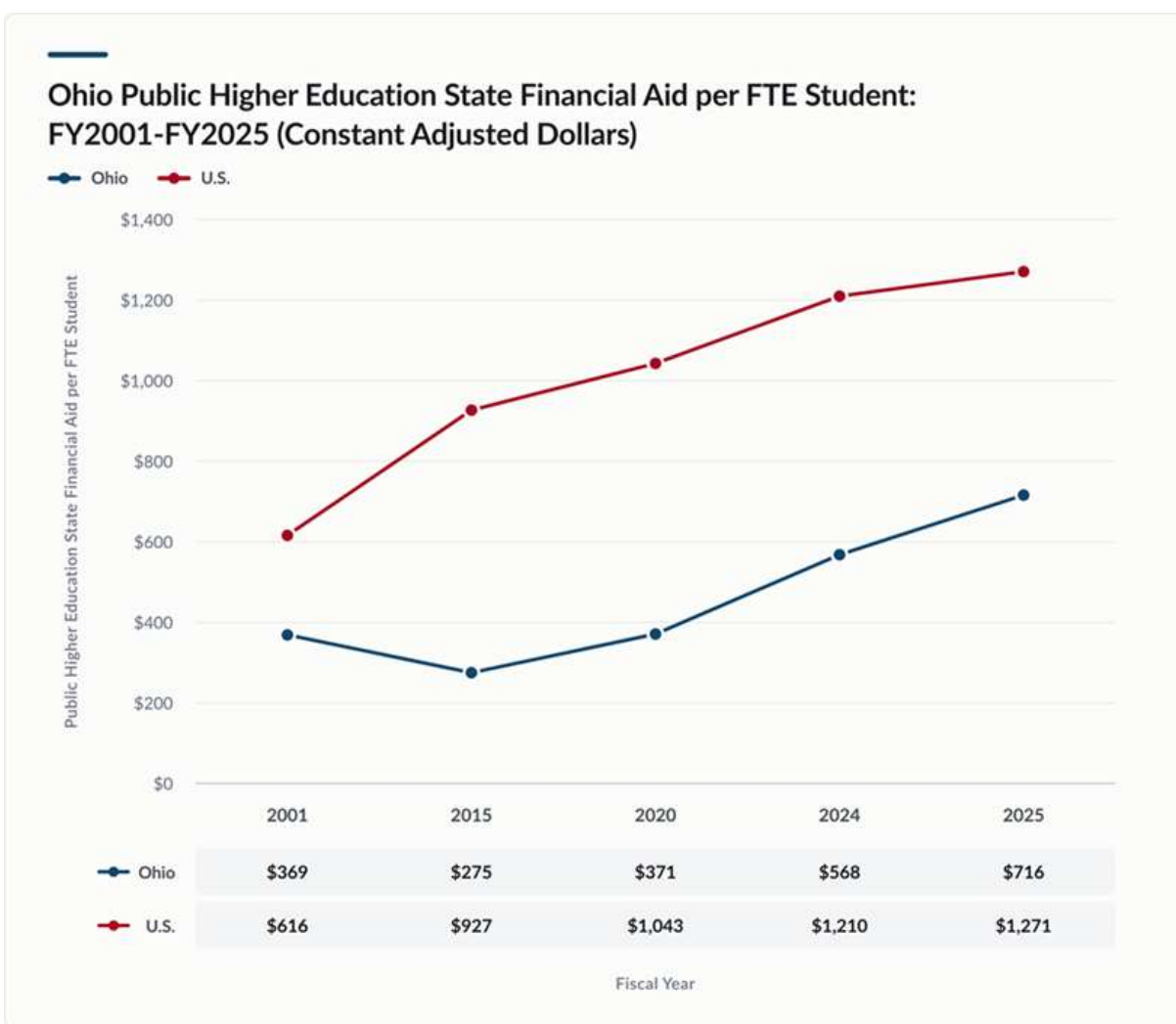
OHIO'S FISCAL DISINVESTMENT LONG PREDATES THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S CUTS

Budgets are moral documents, reflecting what is considered worthy or unworthy. For the past several decades, the Ohio state budget has signaled that maintaining a robust postsecondary educational system was not in the interest of state policymakers. In fiscal year (FY) 2025, Ohio provided \$8,352 in public higher education appropriations per full-time equivalent (FTE) student, with \$8,357 per two-year institution FTE students and only \$6,928 per student at four-year institution FTE student.¹⁴ The overall figure is well below the national FY25 average of \$12,082 per FTE student, 29 percent lower than the inflation-adjusted amount Ohio spent in FY01 (\$11,829), and even 15 percent lower than what Ohio spent all the way back in FY80 (\$9,848).

Despite the high rate of college-educated workers who both attended college and still work in



Ohio, the state is currently bottom ten for the overall percentage of its workforce that has a college degree at only 30 percent.¹⁵ A similar story plays out for state-level financial aid spending per FTE student, but with the fortunes reversed between two-year and four-year institutions. Ohio spent \$716 per FTE student on state financial aid in FY25, which is 44 percent lower than the national average (\$1,271) but 96 percent higher than what was spent in FY01 (\$369). However, the average financial aid spending per two-year institution FTE student was only \$94 compared to \$794 for four-year institutions. These financial trends are troubling on their own but become increasingly alarming when paired with the state's other attacks on the postsecondary system.

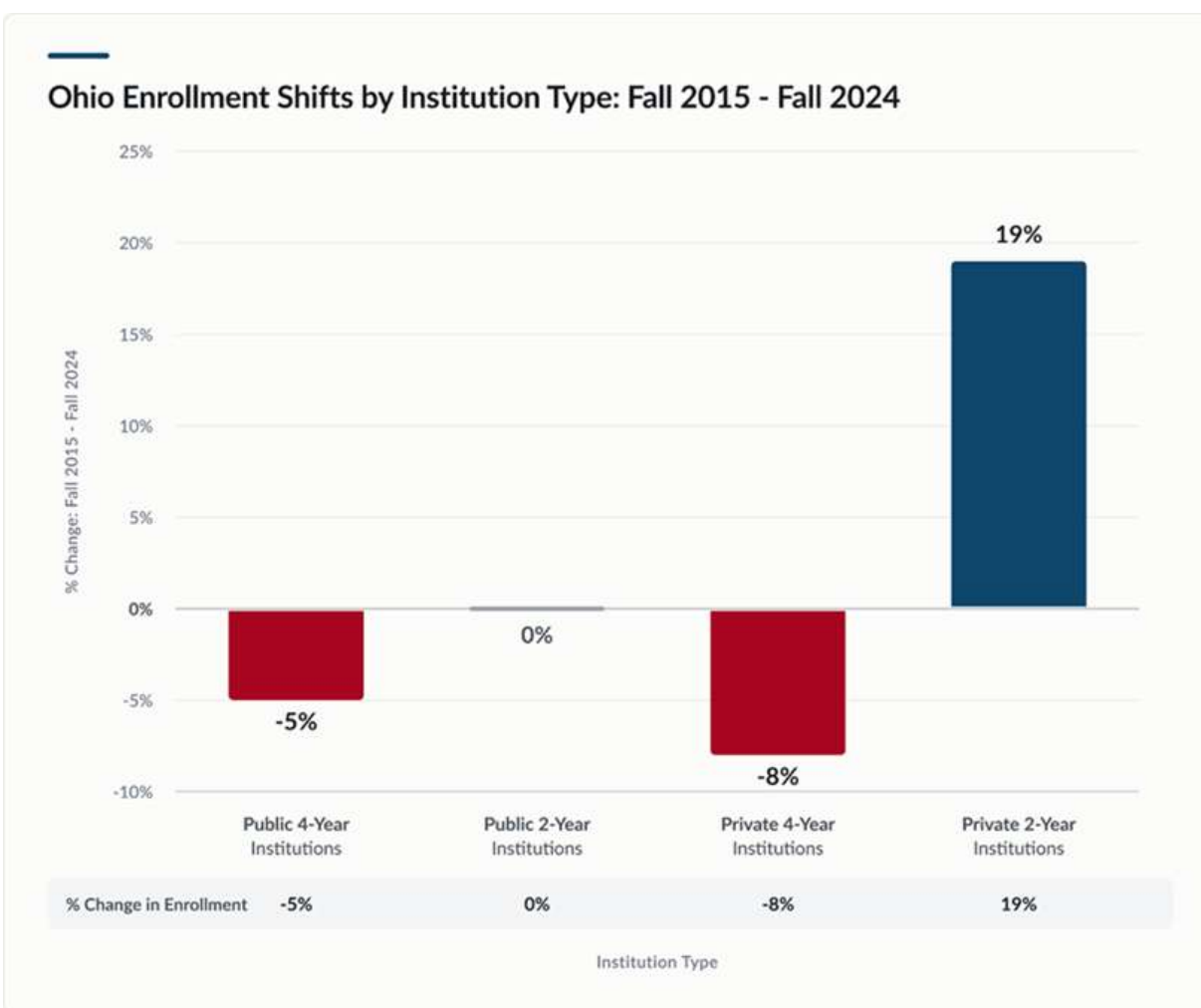


State Appropriations for Public 4-Year Institutions: Fall 2015-Fall 2024¹⁶

Institution	Fall 2015 (millions)	Fall 2024 (millions)	% Change	Declines in last 10 years
Shawnee State University	16.26	22.58	39%	2
Miami University-Oxford	56.94	75.74	33%	3
University of Cincinnati-Main Campus	182	233.08	28%	2
Bowling Green State University-Main Campus	67.23	85.05	26%	3
Youngstown State University	38.93	48.86	25%	2
Ohio State University-Main Campus	416.19	504.5	21%	3
Ohio University-Main Campus	141.1	164.05	16%	3
Kent State University at Kent	103.74	119.92	16%	5
Miami University-Hamilton	7.21	8.29	15%	4
Cleveland State University	71.02	80.35	13%	1
Wright State University-Lake Campus	2.8	3.1	11%	5
University of Toledo	106.42	109.9	3%	4
Ohio State University-Lima Campus	3.59	3.58	-1%	5
Miami University-Middletown	5.13	4.98	-3%	5
Ohio University-Zanesville Campus	4.25	3.98	-6%	6
Wright State University-Main Campus	83.19	75.99	-9%	6
Central State University	18.13	15.72	-13%	5
University of Akron Main Campus	100.22	82.79	-17%	6
Ohio University-Chillicothe Campus	5.07	4.15	-18%	7

ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN OHIO'S POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

From Fall 2015 through Fall 2024, there was an average enrollment decline of only two percent across all 69 of Ohio's public institutions, compared to a four percent increase for every public institution across the country.¹⁷ Only the University of Cincinnati-Main Campus had a single enrollment decline during that period.¹⁸ Ohio's 50 private institutions had an average enrollment decline of six percent during the same period; Kenyon College was the only private school that didn't have any drop in enrollment. However, 25 of Ohio's private four-year institutions had enrollment declines of 10 percent or larger compared to only nine of the public four-years. This runs counter to the narrative that Ohio's public institutions are the dead weight of the state's higher education system and therefore should be first in line for state cuts,¹⁹ which has since been met with overwhelming opposition and walked back²⁰ and demonstrates how important public institutions are to equitable access—which is likely why they are being targeted.



Total Enrollment for Public 4-Year Institutions: Fall 2015-Fall 2024²¹

Institution	Fall 2015	Fall 2024	% Change	Declines in last 10 years
Central State University	1,804	2,708	50%	5
Ohio University-Zanesville Campus	1,478	2,009	36%	6
University of Cincinnati-Main Campus	36,042	45,026	25%	0
Ohio University-Chillicothe Campus	1,799	2,170	21%	6
Wright State University-Lake Campus	1,172	1,356	16%	4
Ohio State University-Main Campus	58,663	61,443	5%	3
Bowling Green State University-Main Campus	16,908	17,594	4%	3
Miami University-Oxford	19,076	18,838	-1%	4
Youngstown State University	12,442	12,204	-2%	7
Ohio University-Main Campus	29,012	26,323	-9%	7
Kent State University at Kent	30,067	26,374	-12%	6
Cleveland State University	16,915	14,074	-17%	9
Shawnee State University	3,881	3,231	-17%	7
Miami University-Hamilton	3,030	2,480	-18%	8
Ohio State University-Lima Campus	1,010	723	-28%	8
University of Toledo	20,377	14,358	-30%	9
Miami University-Middletown	1,877	1,190	-37%	7
Wright State University-Main Campus	17,070	10,603	-38%	7
University of Akron Main Campus	23,101	13,332	-42%	9

Notably, these enrollment declines happened despite a statewide population growth of younger adults since 2020. Though Ohio's total population grew between 2020 and 2024 by just over 0.5 percent,²² this growth was sharply divided by age category, with the number of people aged 15-24 and 30-40 increasing and the number of children aged 10-14 and under five seeing the largest declines.²³ This indicates that the state's postsecondary system enrollment declines are being driven by factors outside of general demographic trends. This is also a specific concern for Ohio's public four-year institutions, whose graduates aged 25-34 generate \$3.4 billion per year in economic value, tying Maryland for the twelfth-highest state in that value measurement.²⁴

Annual Estimates of Ohio Resident Population by Age Group: 2020-2024²⁵

Age	April 1, 2020 Estimates Base	July 1, 2024 Population Estimate	Total Change
Under 5 years	690,581	655,527	-35,054
5 to 9 years	718,559	716,903	-1,656
10 to 14 years	766,948	732,049	-34,899
15 to 19 years	767,492	769,796	2,304
20 to 24 years	744,600	758,434	13,834
25 to 29 years	783,698	765,077	-18,621
30 to 34 years	769,874	810,685	40,811
35 to 39 years	740,718	771,477	30,759

Top 12 States in Economic Value Contribution from Public Four-Year College Graduates Ages 25–34 Per Year²⁶

State	Economic Value Contribution Per Year (Billions)
US Overall	\$140 B
California	\$27.7 B
Texas	\$18.7 B
New York	\$12.3 B
New Jersey	\$6.8 B
Washington	\$6.7 B
Florida	\$5.9 B
Illinois	\$5.5 B
Georgia	\$5.2 B
North Carolina	\$5.1 B
Michigan	\$4.9 B
Virginia	\$3.7 B
Maryland	\$3.4 B
Ohio	\$3.4 B

IMPACT OF OHIO SENATE BILL 1

State legislators in Ohio have adapted not by improving educational opportunities and accessibility but instead slashing educational programming and purposefully pushing away marginalized students. Senate Bill 1, which went into effect in July 2025, was a legislative package passed to overhaul Ohio's higher education system. Provisions included:

- Banning state institutions from having or establishing offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion and preventing those concepts from being used in job descriptions, admissions, or institutional scholarships;
- Requiring institutions to declare that they would not endorse or oppose any "controversial belief" or policy "except on matters that directly impact the institution's funding or mission of discovery, improvement and dissemination of knowledge," with an exception to endorse the United States Congress if it were to declare war against a foreign power;²⁷
- Prohibiting institution employees from collectively bargaining over faculty evaluation policies, post-tenure review policies, and policies on tenure, along with prohibiting labor strikes; and
- Eliminating undergraduate programs that have conferred an average of fewer than five degrees annually over a three-year period.

A cornerstone of Senate Bill 1 is the disingenuous framing that liberal arts programs cannot meet workforce demands and waste resources better used on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs. This inaccurate framing is a smokescreen that conceals educational cuts based on political ideology.²⁸

By focusing support on programs with the highest earning potential, Ohio is deterring prospective professionals like teachers and child care providers, which will decimate the long-term health of the state's child care industry, along with the entire national economy, purely for short-term cost reductions. Similarly, shrinking the pathways for degrees in social work and public health will only reduce critical support services for vulnerable populations. This decision also means that students interested in public health, social work, teaching, other humanities, or the arts—areas of study that often lead to careers in public service—may have to leave Ohio to pursue their interests or abandon those goals altogether. Ultimately these changes harm everyone and exacerbate inequitable access to certain professions; but women, who in 2022 represented majorities in every degree field outside of engineering and business & management,²⁹ and students of color³⁰ will be hit the hardest by the changes.

Picking and choosing what educational programs are allowable based purely on workforce metrics also neglects the other half of higher education's dual mandate: giving students the necessary tools to continuously learn throughout their lives, think for themselves, and understand the world around them. Ohio's policymakers are currently operating the higher education system in a manner that will fail the above mandate and the mandate of employment training for students. Senate Bill 1's policies were not implemented out of genuine concern for higher education but instead followed the lead of conservative policymakers in states like Florida,³¹ Texas,³² Indiana,³³ and Utah³⁴ to weaponize higher education in the service of other political goals. It is beyond hypocritical for state lawmakers to advertise for the world's best and

brightest to be educated in Ohio while purposefully closing avenues of educational access for marginalized students.³⁵

The moral priorities of state legislators regarding higher education are reflected both in what they don't allocate funding for and in what they do. Shortly after passing Senate Bill 1, the Ohio General Assembly allocated \$24 million to fund direct interference into academic freedom on five of the state's university campuses through the opening of "civic centers,"³⁶ which enforce conservative propaganda and actively present a false reality that the history and current politics of this country have no room for the concept of diversity.³⁷ State policymakers have also proposed legislation to mandate student participation in said interference as a graduation requirement,³⁸ dismayed by the lack of interest from students despite dangling \$4,000 scholarships to get students to participate.³⁹ Assembly members are currently considering legislation to tie state postsecondary funding to compliance with Senate Bill 1, including making universities and colleges eliminate all diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and publicly list employees who had worked on those efforts.⁴⁰

INSTITUTIONAL MISMANAGEMENT HAS ALSO HARMED OHIO'S POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM

Educational institutions have played their own role in the current state of Ohio's higher education system through leadership that has not met the standards needed to tackle today's challenges, especially regarding the health, safety, and agency of students. Failing to match General Assembly policy reforms with the centering of student voice and safeguards against current and future institutional misconduct will doom the state's postsecondary system to insolvency regardless of financial resources invested by policymakers.

State education systems rely first and foremost on the reputations of their flagship institutions to educate the most students and perform the most research. The Ohio State University, Ohio's flagship institution and one of the largest universities in the country, has long been plagued by chaos and misconduct. Four presidents have led the university over the past six years, with the most recent transition stemming from an "inappropriate relationship" involving former president Ted Carter Jr.⁴¹ For the past eight years, the institution has been dealing with lawsuits related to campus doctor Richard Strauss's sexual abuse of nearly 200 students over the course of several decades, including a recent \$100 million settlement with victims.⁴² After arresting peaceful student protestors in 2024 over their support of Palestine,⁴³ the institution has hidden behind interpretation of state law to further limit speech on campus.⁴⁴ Billionaire Les Wexner, a prominent institutional donor and current chair of the university's medical center, was deposed by Congress about his deep ties to Jeffery Epstein⁴⁵ and has not attended a medical center board meeting in over a year.⁴⁶ Ohio State has also ignored calls from students, faculty, and community members to remove Wexner's name from the many buildings on campus that bear it, including the university's medical center.⁴⁷

Other colleges and universities across Ohio have had their own institutional mismanagement. Cleveland State University shut down its student radio station⁴⁸ and is attempting to shut down its world-renowned poetry center⁴⁹ in an effort to appear job-focused by slashing liberal arts

programming. In recent years Miami University approved the building of a new basketball arena, estimated to cost over \$240 million,⁵⁰ while cutting arts and humanities programs over student objections.⁵¹ Institutions are getting in their own way by having these headlines dominate the great educational work and community benefit that they provide day in and day out. Ohio University's leadership has alienated its already-small, marginalized student community⁵² by remaining silent after a speaker invited by a student organization made Nazi salutes and other antisemitic, sexist, and racist remarks during his talk,⁵³ along with continually stalling collective bargaining discussions with their faculty.⁵⁴

Every single one of these instances directly impact students, who may decide to transfer or leave rather than attend an institution where they don't feel safe or supported. These issues can't be solved through additional appropriations, especially since large misconduct settlements impact a school's bottom line and its ability to support students with low incomes. Ohio and other states need to pass and implement proactive policies that support a comprehensive postsecondary education system (including arts and humanities), address issues of safety and security for all students, and invest in uplifting and centering student voice and agency.



How Ohio and Other States Can Move Forward

A robust postsecondary education system that provides healthy educational opportunities for all students requires learning from the mistakes of state policymakers and institutional leaders. Ohio is far from the only state experiencing the fiscal challenges and moral questions outlined above. Facing this broad scope of needed reform presents an opportunity for the state to showcase how meaningful state-level reforms can preserve and improve equitable access to education systems across the country and protect these systems from even the most daunting challenges.

PROACTIVELY INVESTING IN EDUCATION

Ohio has the resources available to sustain its higher education system without having to sacrifice educational pathways or accessibility. However, using these resources takes the political willpower of and commitment from the General Assembly, which will need to make different choices. Efforts like House Bill 854, meant to remove financial barriers for students via increased taxation on the state's wealthiest residents,⁵⁵ should be the standard framing in discussing how to fiscally preserve higher education. This would match Washington's first-dollar⁵⁶ financial aid program funded by business and occupation taxes,⁵⁷ Massachusetts' millionaire tax to boost state higher education funding,⁵⁸ and Illinois' current efforts to increase higher education funding by \$135 million per year for the next fifteen years.⁵⁹

PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS AND SUPPORT

State policymakers must also provide dedicated basic needs support to maximize the number of students that can pursue postsecondary opportunities. The federal government has placed recent state-level basic needs innovations⁶⁰ across the country at extreme risk due to federal benefits cuts and new cost shifts to states, leaving fewer resources available to invest in higher education and student success.⁶¹ Institutions cannot food pantry their way out of the basic needs insecurities faced by students, nor can campus-based supports replace the critical role public benefits play in helping students meet their basic needs. Access to public benefits remains foundational to students' ability to stay enrolled, succeed academically, and complete their education. Ohio and other states must find the budget space to provide the supports that the federal government is abandoning.

ESTABLISHING AND ENFORCING PROTECTIONS FOR STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES AGAINST INSTITUTIONAL MISCONDUCT

Policymakers should prioritize protecting human rights and First Amendment rights for all students, regardless of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, or disability status. At the same time, institutions need to prioritize protecting students, especially from “rainmakers”—well-known professors and grant-writing researchers—who may not feel they need to comply with the rules that govern other employees. Proactive policies and programs can prevent and address issues of gender-based violence and harassment. Components of successful policies and programs include ensuring that a zero tolerance policy prohibiting discrimination, gender-based violence, harassment, and retaliation is adopted, widely communicated, and easily accessible to all; providing student-led training, education, and awareness programming on identifying and responding to gender-based violence and harassment; and establishing an independent, trauma-informed, gender-responsive, consistent, and transparent process for reporting concerns and/or remedying complaints that includes support for those impacted, active ongoing review of processes and procedures, and clear consequences for both harassment and retaliation.

FULLY REPEALING SENATE BILL 1

Any efforts from state policymakers to improve Ohio’s postsecondary education outcomes and preserve the system’s sustainability must start with a full repeal of Senate Bill 1. Due to this law’s provisions, Ohio educational institutions have been set significantly behind other states in providing affordable and welcoming educational options for students and are unable to recruit the world-renowned faculty and staff that have historically brought the state’s institutions to prominence. Effective state postsecondary education policy is derived from incorporating the perspectives of the many communities calling Ohio’s campuses home, not through attempting to silence the voices of marginalized students and campus labor.

Conclusion

Ohio is just one of many states experiencing the consequences of state-level disinvestment and institutional-level mismanagement across their postsecondary education systems. And it is not the only state deliberating how to navigate a hostile federal policy environment. However, there are tangible and actionable solutions available for state policymakers and institutional leaders who are willing to act in service of their students, campuses, and communities.

Endnotes

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