

House Committee on Education and Workforce

Hearing on College Costs

Wednesday, February 4, 2026



STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF FLORIDA CHANCELLOR RAY RODRIGUES TESTIMONY

In October 2025, the Pew Research Center surveyed Americans regarding their thoughts on higher education. Respondents were asked to gauge whether Americans think the U.S. higher education system is headed in the right direction or the wrong direction. Seven out of ten Americans think American higher education is going in the wrong direction. The survey revealed the dissatisfaction cuts across both political parties, with 77% of polled Republicans and Republican-leaning independents saying the higher education system is going in the wrong direction, compared to 65% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning individuals.

About eight in ten adults say colleges and universities are doing a fair or poor job of keeping tuition costs affordable, and about half or more give colleges and universities fair or poor ratings on preparing students for well-paying jobs in today's economy. Furthermore, a July 2025 survey by Gallup revealed that the number one reason Americans have lost confidence in higher education is that liberal political agendas are being pushed by faculty onto students.

In Florida, we are taking a different approach. The State University System of Florida comprises 12 institutions and serves more than 431,000 students, making it the second-largest public university system in the nation. Florida has ranked number one in higher education by *U.S. News & World Report* since the inception of the rankings in 2017, recognized for providing high-quality, accessible, and affordable education.

THE FLORIDA BLUEPRINT

Florida's First Higher Education Reform: Accountability

During the Great Recession, Florida followed the conventional path of reducing state appropriations to higher education and increasing tuition for students. According to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) data, from 2008-2013, the national average higher education appropriation per FTE fell 23%, compared to Florida's 43%—the second largest appropriation reduction in the United States. During this same time period, SHEEO data reveals that the national average undergraduate in-state tuition increased by 39%. In Florida, our undergraduate in-state tuition increased by 86%. No state increased tuition more than Florida during the Great Recession. Florida was racing down the same wrong path as every other state.

Incentives to Reach Florida's Higher Education Goals

In 2013, Florida emerged from the Great Recession, and the state budget increased for the first time in five years. Former Governor Rick Scott then championed a reinvestment in higher education. However, Governor Scott called for a change to the funding model. Rather than continue in the traditional input-based funding formula driven by student enrollment, Governor Scott advocated to change to an output-based funding formula driven by successful student outcomes. The new funding method would define the goals

and then align incentives to reward achieving the goals. The Governor, Legislature, and SUS of Florida designed a Performance-Based-Funding method that was implemented in 2013.

Through 10 key metrics, Florida focused on student success in student retention, four-year graduation, post-graduation employment, median wages after graduation, accessibility, successful graduation of Pell recipients and transfer students from our community and state colleges, and increased value of degrees in alignment with the state's critical workforce needs. Each year, the SUS of Florida reports the results of each institution on each of the ten Performance-Based Funding metrics.

Aligning degrees with state workforce needs was completed in partnership with our state Department of Commerce. We identified existing workforce shortages and emerging high-wage jobs, then designated the associated majors as Programs of Strategic Emphasis and included metrics around these programs in our Performance-Based Funding model.

Florida is one of a few states that includes post-graduation employment and wages as accountability metrics for universities to receive funding. Including these metrics, along with degrees aligned with Florida's workforce needs, ensures success for our students after they graduate.

Slashing Administrative Bloat

Despite our increased appropriations, the SUS of Florida keeps costs low for Florida students by being a good steward of taxpayer dollars and holding our universities to high standards of operational efficiency. Accountability and transparency facilitate this success. Section 1011.90, Florida Statutes, requires each university to include in its annual legislative budget request the five-year trend information on the proportion of FTE dedicated to instruction and research compared to administration.

According to research cited by Forbes on August 29, 2023, full-time administrators at universities have grown by an average of 3.9% annually over the past four decades. This growth rate tracks with the Occupational Outlook Handbook published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which projects an annual growth rate of 3% from 2023 to 2033 for post-secondary administrators.

However, in the SUS of Florida, the percentage of state-funded employee FTE in administration has increased by 0.2% annually from 2015 to 2025.

Independent research confirms our success in controlling administrative bloat. Economist Preston Cooper, a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, published a study on March 3, 2025, analyzing the data reported by universities to the U.S. Department of Education (IPEDS) to quantify the extent of administrative bloat. His analysis revealed that the universities fell into five quintiles. The highest quintile included Ivy League institutions, Ivy plus institutions, and prominent flagship institutions like the University of California – Los Angeles, The University of Michigan, The University of Texas – Austin,

The University of Wisconsin – Madison, and The Ohio State University. These institutions, on average, have 160 administrators per 1,000 students.

The SUS of Florida has, on average, 62 administrators per 1,000 students, significantly below the top quintile and below the overall national average of 70 administrators per 1,000 students. Maintaining transparency on administrative growth allows the SUS of Florida to control these costs, which have run rampant in peer institutions.

In the spirit of accountability, the Florida Legislature passed legislation requiring the development of the [MyFloridaFuture](#) tool. This is an online platform to compare information on academic programs and employment data, including salaries and employment rates for every academic program at each university in the SUS of Florida. Students can see median earnings for academic programs at one, five, and ten years after graduation, compare earnings, and see the percentage of graduates working full-time. This tool helps students identify how quickly each program will yield a positive rate of return, and it is the most visited page on the System's website.

Post-Tenure Review

On July 1, 2022, Florida Senate Bill 7044 went into effect, authorizing our Board of Governors to adopt a regulation requiring a uniform post-tenure review process for each tenured faculty member. In 1996, Florida instituted post-tenure review through collective bargaining. Over time, differences in the ten universities with tenure (two Florida universities do not award tenure) developed as each faculty unit bargained their agreement.

The regulation required each tenured faculty member to undergo a comprehensive post-tenure review every five years. The regulation, after rigorous development, was adopted on March 29, 2023. By August 2023, universities began their first reviews, which had outcomes reported to university presidents and Boards of Trustees. Audits are required every three years, beginning in January 2024, with our office staff receiving the first round of results in Summer 2024.

Reviews included evaluation of performance in research, teaching, and service, as well as compliance with laws and policies. During the last two years, more than 1,700 tenured faculty were reviewed; 910 (53%) Exceeded Expectations, 694 (40%) Met Expectations, 104 (6%) Needed Improvement, and 16 (1%) were Unsatisfactory. Universities had 80 faculty members resign before going through their post-tenure review.

Throughout the last two years, most faculty (93%) met or exceeded expectations. Universities collectively awarded over \$8.5 million to recognize those faculty who received strong reviews.

Florida's Second Higher Education Reform: Affordability

Accountability and transparency led the Legislature, former Governor Scott, and current Governor DeSantis to champion continued investment in our universities. State appropriations for the SUS of Florida have increased from \$1.7 billion in 2012 to \$4.8 billion in 2025. These increased appropriations have allowed our System to freeze in-state undergraduate tuition since 2013, the year Performance-Based-Funding was implemented, ensuring that Florida students can achieve their higher education goals at a state institution without the burden of student loans.

The result is clear: Florida has the lowest resident undergraduate tuition and fees in the country. The average tuition cost for a Florida student is \$6,359, compared to the national average of \$11,950. We also have the third-lowest out-of-state undergraduate tuition and fees in the country, averaging \$23,400, compared to the national average of \$31,880. Our Board limits the enrollment of out-of-state students (including international students) to a total of 10% for our undergraduate students in the System, ensuring that Florida students have access to our universities.

Florida is #3 in the nation in financial aid awarded to first-time, full-time undergraduates in 2023-24, in the category of percentage of students receiving state/local grants and/or scholarships, at 69.8%, compared to the national average of 41.3%. Florida is #2 in the nation in merit-based financial aid awarded in 2023-24. In 2023-24, Florida awarded over \$977 million in total student aid, including need-based, non-need-based, and non-grant aid.

As a result of our low tuition and strong financial aid programs, fewer students in our System take out loans. Our most recent data shows that in the fall of 2024, 80% of Florida-resident undergraduate students enrolled in the SUS of Florida without student loans. Our System ranks third in the nation for undergraduates without loans.

According to the most recent SHEEO data, public four-year universities receive an average of 50% of their revenue from state appropriations and 50% from net tuition revenue. The SUS of Florida receives 88% of its revenue from state appropriations and only receives 12% from tuition charged to students. This makes the SUS of Florida the most highly funded system from state appropriations.

Access is another key priority for the SUS of Florida. We have over 99,000 Pell Grant recipients enrolled in our System. Our Board has a Performance-Based-Funding metric to measure the six-year graduation rate of these students, but we also track the four-year graduation rate and have a goal in our 2030 Strategic Plan for the four-year graduation rate of our Pell Students to be the same rate as that of all of our students. Our four-year graduation rate for Pell students is 60% for the most recent cohort of students.

Florida's Third Higher Education Reform: Eliminating Ideological Agendas

In 2021, the Florida Legislature required the SUS of Florida to conduct a non-partisan, statistically valid annual Viewpoint Diversity and Intellectual Freedom survey of students, faculty, and staff to determine the culture of Viewpoint Diversity and Intellectual Freedom on each campus.

Our 2025 survey revealed 80.4% of our Florida students believe their campus supports an environment of free expression. In addition, 78.8% of our Florida students believe their campus provides viewpoint diversity. Florida's results are higher than the results reported in national surveys.

In 2023, the Florida Legislature established the Office of Public Policy Events within the System for the advancement of knowledge, and that such advancement is facilitated by the fearless sifting and winnowing of a wide diversity of views, and that the open discussion and debate of contested public policy issues from diverse perspectives provides essential preparation for mature citizenship and an informed exercise of the right to vote. Universities organize, publicize, and stage debates or group forums to address, from multiple, divergent, and opposing perspectives, an extensive range of public policy issues widely discussed and debated in society at large. In accordance with statutes, each university was required to host two events in the fall and two events in the spring with speakers representing a diversity of perspectives.

In 2023, Governor DeSantis championed legislation to revise our general education curriculum to ensure students graduate as informed citizens through rigorous general education courses that promote and preserve the constitutional republic through traditional, historically accurate, and high-quality coursework. Courses with curricula based on unproven, speculative, or exploratory content are best suited as elective or specific program prerequisite credit, not general education credit.

We have also eliminated unnecessary ideological agendas on campuses that run counter to our mission of providing a well-rounded experience for our students. Taxpayer-funded DEI expenditures are prohibited in Florida, and diversity statements on hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions have also been eliminated.

The End Result - Academic Excellence

Radical transparency and relentless accountability drive success. Our Performance-Based-Funding results speak for themselves.

- Nearly 90% of full-time students are returning to their university for their second year with a GPA of 2.0 or higher.
- Florida SUS students are also graduating on time, with 63.5% of full-time students graduating in four years. This rate is nearly the same rate as the national average of 65% for students graduating in six years.
- Undergraduate degrees awarded in Programs of Strategic Emphasis, degree programs aligned with Florida's critical workforce needs, have increased to 60%.

Graduate degrees awarded in Programs of Strategic Emphasis have increased to 66%.

- Over 74% of State University System of Florida bachelor's graduates are either continuing their education or employed full-time within one year of graduation with wages exceeding \$40,000.
- The Median wage of bachelor's graduates after one year of graduation is \$51,000, significantly more than the \$33,000 earned by Florida high school graduates.
- Despite banning affirmative action in admission in 1998, over 44% of bachelor's degrees awarded in the State University System of Florida went to students who identify as Black or Hispanic.

The State University System of Florida is leading the nation in different measures of student success, including:

Measure	Florida		Nation
	Rate	Rank	
4-year graduation rate for first-time in college students 2018-2022 cohort	60%	#2	47%
6-year graduation rate for first-time in college students 2018-2024 cohort	76%	#1	65%
6-year graduation rate for first-time in college students, Pell students only 2018-2024 cohort	72%	#1	53%
4-year graduation rate for first-time in college students, Black students only 2018-2022 cohort	49%	#1	28%
4-year graduation rate for first-time in college students, Hispanic students only 2018-2022 cohort	58%	#2	38%

The Working Families Tax Cuts Act

We are proud to work with our federal partners to provide financial assistance to our students. Thanks to the Working Families Tax Cuts Act, there are several provisions that benefit students with Pell Grants and updates to institutional accountability.

The Act also adds a “Workforce Pell”, which can be used for short-term accredited workforce training programs. We applaud the federal government’s provision to support and expand the Pell Grant program.

Institutions that have graduates who consistently earn less than the earners with only a high school diploma will lose access to federal student loans under the Direct Loan program (Title IV of the Higher Education Act). We applaud the federal government’s accountability measure demanding a positive ROI for college graduates.

CONCLUSION

The State University System of Florida will continue to serve as a national model of excellence for student success while providing high-quality education that is affordable and accessible.