



PRESIDENT: TYLER HARVEY

MEETING MINUTES

Date: September 8, 2026 | Time: 2:30 p.m.

Location: Strom Thurmond Institute Auditorium

The Secretary verified quorum.

CALL TO ORDER

The Faculty Senate meeting was called to order at 2:30 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- The minutes of the August 11, 2026 Faculty Senate meeting were approved without objection.
- The minutes of the August 18, 2026 General Faculty Meeting were approved without objection.

REPORT FROM J. COLE SMITH, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS & PROVOST

This report was moved ahead in the agenda to accommodate Provost Smith's schedule.

- Smith thanked the Senate for the depth with which it is approaching current issues and said the administration relies on the Senate's perspective more than Senators may realize. He described the trust and credibility developed between Faculty Senate and administration as allowing leaders to identify and address problems earlier.
- Smith reported attending an Undergraduate Student Government meeting the previous week. USG is interested in working more effectively with Faculty Senate, and Smith encouraged bringing student-government liaisons into Faculty Senate work when appropriate.
- Smith is beginning an initiative focused on Clemson's commitment to veterans, military-connected families, and military heritage. He said Clemson has an opportunity to improve direct support for students, faculty, and staff, attract external support, and connect relevant research and community engagement. Faculty interested in helping shape the effort through a small number of listening sessions were invited to contact Smith directly by email.
- Smith cautioned faculty to review reused syllabi carefully. Material copied forward from prior semesters, particularly political comments unrelated to course content, can create problems. He emphasized that this is not a centralized review of syllabi, but asked faculty to make sure everything included in a syllabus is there intentionally.
- Smith reported that he has visited most academic departments and is finding the listening sessions valuable. As Clemson focuses resources more carefully, he emphasized preserving what is distinctive about the university, including its faculty, students, and obligations to students and the state.

- **Question:** What kind of participation is Smith seeking for the veterans initiative? **Response:** Smith said the immediate goal is to signal that the issue is a priority and identify people who can help determine what Clemson should do, what resources are needed, and how those resources might be acquired. The university needs to learn directly from military-connected communities what support is actually needed.
- **Question:** How can interested faculty join? **Response:** Faculty should email Smith. He anticipates a small number of listening sessions rather than a standing committee with regular meetings.
- **Comment/Question:** A Senator commended Smith and President Ayers for involving faculty in decision-making and asked whether the Provost's Office might help harmonize communication and funding procedures that vary among colleges without undermining deans' authority. **Response:** Smith said variation among colleges is sometimes appropriate but can also arise simply from different local habits and can impede interdisciplinary collaboration. He is open to ideas, noting that some opportunities for improvement may be straightforward while others will be more difficult.

SPECIAL ORDERS

- 1) Graham Neff, Director of Athletics — Clemson Athletics Update
 - The presentation slides are attached. The bulleted notes below record information Neff provided verbally that was not present in the slides; they do not capture the full presentation.
 - Neff noted that college athletics has experienced extraordinary change during the past five years, particularly through the transfer portal and name, image, and likeness (NIL), while the academic role and expectations for student-athletes have remained unchanged.
 - Athletics is working strategically to offset new costs, including NIL-related costs, while continuing to self-fund scholarships for 515 student-athletes.
 - Neff described continued uncertainty associated with NIL, the transfer portal, conference realignment, and possible federal legislation. Athletics' priorities include building competitive rosters, managing compensation and contracts, growing revenue, and participating in the same university-wide financial restraint and slowdowns affecting other units.
 - Faculty benefits include a 20% discount on football and men's basketball season tickets, together with IPTAY point credit toward priority seating, and faculty access with a Clemson ID to selected athletic events.
 - **Question:** Athletics reported being 93% self-funded. Where does the remaining 7% come from? **Response:** Neff identified three sources: an annual scholarship tuition waiver of approximately \$6–7 million, under which out-of-state student-athletes are treated as in-state for tuition purposes; approximately \$8 million annually from the student athletic fee; and approximately \$11 million in institutional support. He noted that the cost of competing has grown faster than Athletics' ability to cover all expenses and that total campus support in FY2025 was approximately \$25 million, compared with approximately \$46 million at the University of South Carolina.
 - **Question:** Given projected expense growth, slower revenue growth, and demographic pressures, how can Athletics contribute to Clemson's value proposition over the next decade? **Response:** Neff said historical data connect successful athletics with broader out-of-state reach and tuition revenue. Athletics is not the sole contributor to Clemson's value proposition, but he argued that investment in athletics can play an important role and provide institutional value.
- 2) Rick Petillo, Senior Vice President of Finance and Operations and Chief Financial Officer —

FY2027 Budget Update

- The presentation slides are attached. The bulleted notes below record supplemental information Petillo provided verbally; they do not capture the full presentation.
- Petillo emphasized that Clemson can be financially strong while still taking action to preserve long-term financial strength. Rating-agency commentary provides an independent external assessment of Clemson's financial position relative to the broader higher-education sector.
- Clemson does not have a budget deficit. The university has approximately \$1 billion in capital debt, which Petillo described as strong when benchmarked against Clemson's scale and peers. He noted that Clemson's debt-service coverage is rated Aaa and that the university begins the current planning period from a position of financial strength.
- Petillo said the concerning trend is that revenue growth has slowed while expense growth has continued. Clemson therefore needs to recalibrate resource expectations and position itself now for future stability.
- For FY2027, units submitted budgets and then received required adjustments from central administration to align projected revenue and expense growth.
- **Question:** What quantitative measures were used to distribute budget reductions across the university, and will there be transparency about that process? **Response:** Petillo said academic units were given two years to reach their targets, while administrative units are expected to reach theirs this year. Because the allocation model had to be developed quickly, the approach attempted to account for units with smaller budgets and less capacity to absorb reductions, units experiencing higher growth, and units with slower revenue growth. Boundaries were placed on the model, and leaders reviewed the results for reasonableness. Provost Smith added that he reviewed the numbers before they were distributed to academic units, that differences among units were not large, and that recent impacts on individual colleges were considered in mitigating reductions.
- **Question:** What happens if anticipated corrective actions do not occur or units do not meet their budgets? **Response:** Petillo said the expectation, communicated clearly by both the President and Provost, is that units will meet their budgets.
- **Question:** Research faculty are concerned that the Clemson Elevate goal of doubling research by 2035 cannot be achieved without continued investment. Was the research pillar adequately considered in the budget proposal? **Response:** Provost Smith said he has heard this concern repeatedly in listening sessions and considers it fair. Clemson must continue to grow while prioritizing among many worthwhile activities. The standard cannot simply be whether an activity is good, but whether it is sufficiently important for Clemson to prioritize and potentially become preeminent in it. With slower resource growth, Clemson cannot pursue all three strategic pillars at the same level as before. Smith emphasized that prioritization cannot be a top-down process and will require faculty input. He also noted that Clemson is already close to the stated goal of doubling research.
- **Question:** What longer-term structural solutions are being considered beyond short-term budget reductions? **Response:** Petillo said the university has made an important foundational change by turning the budget into an actual spending plan rather than an inventory of funds. Better revenue projections can support longer-term planning, including compensation planning. He encouraged units to examine activities that are valuable but not essential and to reconsider historical processes that may no longer merit priority.
- **Question:** As revenue and expense growth flatten, will the university have greater flexibility to manage cash-flow timing and receivables? **Response:** Petillo said university projections

and analysis are conducted on an accrual basis rather than a cash basis.

- President Harvey ended the discussion because of time and invited Senators with additional questions to send them to him for forwarding to Petillo.

REPORTS

1) Standing Committees

a. Welfare Committee; Chair Cameron Bushnell

- No formal report was presented. The committee is seeking faculty input on two issues:
 - The committee has met with General Counsel regarding free speech and academic freedom and is considering guidance faculty can use in research and teaching. Faculty were invited to send comments and ideas to Bushnell.
 - The committee is also examining faculty morale, communication, and shared governance, including ways to encourage more discussion and cohesiveness within Faculty Senate meetings.

b. Finance and Infrastructure Committee; Chair Raul Chavez-Negrette

- No formal report was presented. Chavez-Negrette asked Senators for information about financial actions being taken in different colleges and about the transparency and communication they are experiencing from their deans. He emphasized that the committee wants input from both Lead Senators and other Senators.

c. Scholastic Policies Committee; Chair Jennifer Holland

- The 2027–2028 Academic Calendar and summary are attached.
- Regarding student recording of faculty, the committee has received guidance from General Counsel and the Provost's Office that faculty may establish classroom policies prohibiting student recording. The committee is seeking feedback on whether Clemson should move from allowing individual classroom policies to adopting a university-wide policy.
- The committee added a new item to its standing agenda after receiving concerns from students with ethical objections to AI. They will be examining issues surrounding student ethical objections to AI in courses that require use of AI. Faculty feedback on the issue is requested.
- Holland summarized major changes in the finalized 2027–2028 Academic Calendar.
 - Terms begin and end later: spring semester begins after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday; a dedicated Winter Term begins December 22; Summer II begins July 3;
 - Study days are included before fall and spring final examinations;
 - The final-examination schedule shifts.
 - Standard class meeting times, contact hours, and the number of instructional days remain unchanged.
 - The new structure also eliminates the need for candidate-grade collection before commencement.
- The calendar is finalized and will not change for 2027–2028. The committee is nevertheless seeking feedback about possible future adjustments, the process by which the calendar was developed, communication plans, issues that may have been overlooked, and possible uses of the Winter Term.

d. Research, Scholarship, and Creative Endeavors Committee; Chair Michael Sehorn

- Research Committee Report 2613, *R-Initiatives Return on Investment Assessment*,

and its appendix are attached. The report concludes that Clemson's R-Initiatives have produced substantial institutional value and recommends restoring stable annual funding, developing more strategically differentiated Accelerator and Catalyst mechanisms, establishing selective research-continuity or bridge support, expanding interdisciplinary and proposal-development support, and improving long-term assessment and communication of program outcomes.

- There were no questions or discussion. The report and its recommendations were adopted unanimously.

e. Policy Committee; Chair Ellen Breazel

- Policy Committee Report 2522, *Libraries*, is attached. The report recommends recognizing the Libraries as an academic unit in the Faculty Manual; adding a dedicated Faculty Manual section describing the Libraries' administrative structure and the role of the Library Chair; locating details about evaluations and search and screening procedures in Library bylaws; specifying that librarians are evaluated on librarianship, scholarship, and service; and clarifying administrative group designations for Library associate deans and department heads.
- There was no discussion. The report and its recommendations were adopted unanimously.
- Breazel thanked faculty who have provided feedback on the continuing-appointments agenda item and reported that the committee continues to work on the proposal.
- She also reported on the Faculty Manual Consultant process, including additions to the Senate By-Laws repository describing the process for review of bylaws and tenure, promotion, and reappointment guidelines. <https://www.clemson.edu/faculty-staff/faculty-senate/governance/college-dept-bylaws.html>
- Questions have arisen about whether references to "department chair" in the Faculty Manual include school directors. Breazel clarified that the intended meaning as approved through previous Senate resolutions is "head of academic unit." An editorial note will be added, and the committee will work to update the terminology throughout the Faculty Manual.

f. *Ad Hoc* Committee on the Future of Higher Education; Chair Sarah White

- *Report 1: Dominant state and national forces shaping the future of higher education, and their influence on public confidence and expectations for higher education* is attached.
- White thanked faculty for responding to the committee survey and encouraged Senators to read Report 1 because it provides context for the committee's remaining work. The report identifies simultaneous structural pressures involving demographics, finances, federal policy, artificial intelligence, new educational competitors, public confidence, and changing expectations for student outcomes.
- Report 2, planned for December, will assess Clemson's current position through a SWOT analysis. Survey responses will be incorporated into that report. White emphasized that understanding Clemson's present position is necessary for planning effectively for the future.
- The report was presented for Senate consideration. A Senate vote to adopt all three reports will be held after presentation of the remaining planned reports.

g. Alpha Committee; Chairs Tyler Harvey and Jace Garrett

- The committee had a productive meeting, and many Alpha Committee members have now selected standing committees on which to participate.

- 2) University Committees/Commissions
 - a. Committee on Committees; Chair Jace Garrett
 - No report was presented.
- 3) Student Government; Representative Jameson Sheehy
 - Sheehy reported that Undergraduate Student Government's executive branch and cabinet have been finalized, the judicial branch is interviewing candidates, and the legislative branch has met twice and conducted numerous interviews.
 - Upcoming work includes student mental-health events and the Green Bandana Project, which provides training after which a green bandana identifies people who can be approached for help connecting students with mental-health resources. Faculty are welcome to participate in this and other upcoming events.
 - Student Government is also working on issues involving Flock cameras, parking, use of capital funds for student projects, and the new academic calendar.
 - **Question:** What concerns do students have about the new academic calendar? **Response:** Sheehy said many students did not know a change was being considered until the calendar had been finalized and published. She also said that, although Student Senate did not adopt a unified position, the selected calendar option was probably the least preferred among students.
- 4) Graduate Student Government; President Justin Gibson and Chief Parliamentary Counsel Matt Harrington
 - Gibson said GSG's primary goal for 2026–2027 is to help Clemson remain competitive in attracting and retaining talented graduate students. GSG plans a systematic assessment of the value graduate students bring to the university, including research expenditures, instructional cost savings, and research productivity, together with the costs associated with losing students to institutions offering more competitive funding packages.
 - Senators may be contacted for information that can support this advocacy. Gibson also asked faculty to continue mentoring graduate students and fostering a culture of care within departments.
 - Harrington discussed opportunities for Faculty Senate and GSG to collaborate more deliberately. He noted that the two bodies share many concerns but historically have lacked consistent cross-communication. GSG hopes to communicate regularly and visibly with Faculty Senate, with Harrington serving as a point of contact for concurrent or complementary issues and for reciprocal requests for faculty or graduate-student input.
 - **Question:** How are master's students represented in GSG, particularly amid declining participation by non-thesis and international master's students? **Response:** Gibson said GSG was preparing to vote on a resolution concerning the tax burden associated with travel reimbursement for international students and has a committee focused on international student affairs. GSG has also seen declining participation among non-thesis master's students and is actively recruiting within those populations. He welcomed additional ideas.
- 5) Faculty Senate President; Tyler Harvey
 - Harvey reported that eight people were nominated for Faculty Representative to the Board of Trustees. The selection committee has met and is narrowing the pool to three finalists, with interviews planned over the following two weeks. Harvey is also coordinating with the new Executive Secretary to the Board of Trustees to ensure that the search aligns with the Board's needs.
 - Harvey reported on the meeting of the Online Undergraduate Steering Committee. The current plan is for the programs to begin in FY2027. Clemson has signed a contract with

a third-party firm to assist with advertising and recruitment, with a goal of 50 students per program in FY2027. Initial tuition and fee approval is expected at the October Board meeting at \$448 per credit hour plus a \$110 fee; 15% is designated for management and 85% for academic units. Additional information is expected in November or December. Faculty in participating programs should be hearing from their units and were encouraged to contact Harvey with concerns.

- The search for a Director of Parking and Transportation Services has begun. The goal is to identify a candidate in November or December for a January start. Faculty with input were invited to contact Harvey.
- Harvey reminded Senators that the October Faculty Senate meeting has been moved to October 6 and will be held at the College of Veterinary Medicine.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- No unfinished business.

NEW BUSINESS

- No new business.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Clemson Votes will host National Voter Registration Day activities on September 15 in Cox Plaza and on the Sistine lawn. Faculty were encouraged to participate and volunteer.
- Clemson Military Affairs will host the 25 Years of Remembrance September 11 Stair Climb at Littlejohn Coliseum. Participants may attend programs at 8:30 a.m. or 10:30 a.m., climb stairs, walk the concourse, or sit and reflect.
- A Faculty Senate Social Hour will be held at Lucky Duck Bistro. Additional low- or no-cost social opportunities are being planned, including possible gatherings at the Botanical Gardens, planetarium, and athletic events.
- Other reminders included Class of '39 nominations, the Fall-In All-In service opportunity, Pumpkinpalooza on October 30–31, and a clothing drive for the Clemson Career Closet.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

Committee Meetings	September 15, 2:30 p.m., Various Locations
Full Senate Meeting	October 6, 2:30 p.m., College of Veterinary Medicine

ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 4:38 p.m.

SIGNATURE

Eliza Gallagher, PhD
Associate Professor
Engineering and Science Education
Secretary, Faculty Senate



9 September 2026

Faculty Senate

September 8, 2026

September Faculty Senate Meeting
Check In



Approval of Minutes



Special Orders

Graham Neff

Director of Athletics



Clemson Athletics Update

Faculty Senate • Sep. 8, 2026

Graham Neff

Director of Athletics

Family: Kristin (wife), Grady, Nolan, Emmett (sons)

- Joined Clemson in 2013 (14th year) –CFO, Deputy
- Named Athletic Director in Dec. 2021 (5th year)



Academic Year in Review

- Clemson posted its highest single-year Academic Progress Rate (APR) in school history, a **998 out of 1,000** (includes 2021-22 through 2024-25 academic years).
 - Ten sports had perfect 1,000 scores
 - 14 sports set program records
- Clemson had a **96 percent** mark in Graduate Success Rate (GSR), tied for the second-highest amongst public institutions and trails only Cincinnati (97).
- Clemson student-athletes recorded GPAs of 3.33 in the Fall and a record-tying 3.35 in the spring, making it **16 consecutive semesters** with a cumulative GPA above 3.00.

Athletic Year in Review

- ACC Championships in Women's Indoor & Outdoor Track and Field; Gymnastics.
 - Clemson has won 3+ ACC Championships in three of the past four years; First time since 1997-2000
- 17 Team NCAA Championship/Tournament/Bowl Appearances
- National Champions: Gladys Chepngetich (800m), Shantae Foreman (triple jump)
- Top 15 in attendance per game in six sports (1 million+ total fans in 2025-26)
 - Baseball, Football, Gymnastics, Lacrosse, Men's Soccer & Softball
- Nine NFL Draft Picks, Four MLS Draft Picks, Five MLB Draft Picks

Clemson Athletics Impact...

- Enhances the student experience, serving the first pillar of **Clemson Elevate**
- Contributes meaningfully to the **local economy** with impact of \$215m per year
- Acts as one of the **primary marketing vehicles** for the University, impacting admissions and applications.
- Fundraising: IPTAY accounts for **42%** (>\$900m since 2014) toward **Fiercely Forward**

Athletics' Role in *Clemson Elevate*

Deliver #1 Student Experience

Mission: Create life-changing experiences through athletics.

Students are critical to the athletic atmosphere!

- More than 80,000 free student admissions in 2025-26
- In total, more than 117,000 students at athletic events in 2025-26
- More than 500 student assistants in support roles.
- More than 50 graduate assistants in various roles.

Creating world-class experiences for our student-athletes



Athletics' Role in *Clemson Elevate*

Estimated Economic Impact from All Athletics and Related Events (Inclusive of Football)

In aggregate, ancillary spending from Clemson Athletics generates \$175 million in total economic output within the four-county region, \$217 million within the state of South Carolina, and \$247 million within the U.S.

Aggregate ancillary spending further supports 2,500 full-time jobs with \$33 million in employee compensation within the state.

Source: *ESI Economic Impact Study, 2025*



What We Do

- Over 93% funded from self-generated revenues;
 - Top Categories: Contributions via IPTAY \$85m, Media Rights/Conference Distributions: \$43m; Tickets: \$39m, Sponsorships/Licensing \$26m
- Many IPTAY funds for specific use, including more than \$18M in scholarship payments to the University annually.
- IPTAY has one of the largest on-campus endowments, contributing aid to more than 500 students per year.
- Facilities/Grounds/Maintenance for campus use (~350 annually), i.e. Ring Ceremony, Graduations, Tigerama, Job Fair, Greek Life, Intramurals, Club Sports.

Athletics & Academics Connectivity

- Faculty Athletic Representative – Dr. Antonis Katsiyannis
- Athletic Council
 - 15 Representatives – Colleges, Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, Student Affairs, Faculty, Student Government
- Athletic-Admissions Review Committee (“AARC”)
- Athletic-Academic Oversight Committee (“AAOC”)
- Head of Athletic Academic Services (Matt Lombardi) >> dual report to Dean of Undergraduate Studies
- CUAD has several practitioners teaching courses (K. Young, E. Sabin, R. Yeargin, etc.)
- Robert H. Brooks Sports Science Institute Board of Advisors

The Athletics Enterprise



Athletics Enterprise Priorities

- **Industry & Landscape Strategy**
 - Strategically Position for the Future
- **Build Roster Resources**
 - Scholarships, Revenue Share, Commercial NIL & Front Office
- **Grow Revenues**
 - Developing Predictable, Diversified Revenue Streams
- **Optimization of Operations**
 - Resource Prioritization

How to Attend Athletic Events

- Football and Men's Basketball: Full-time Clemson University employees receive a 20% discount off the cost of two season tickets and a \$250 IPTAY credit annually (Purple Giving Level) with the purchase of two season tickets
- Softball, Baseball (Reserved) and Women's Gymnastics: Full-time Clemson University employees receive a 20% discount off the cost of two season tickets. Baseball and softball tickets must be purchased through this portal.
- Baseball (Standing Room Only), Women's Basketball, Men's Soccer and Women's Lacrosse: Full-time faculty and staff and their immediate family may enter with a Clemson University ID, except for NCAA Tournament events hosted at Clemson.
- Non-Ticketed Sports: Men and Women's Cross Country, Men and Women's Golf, Men's and Women's Tennis, Men's and Women's Track & Field, Women's Volleyball, Women's Soccer

Rick Petillo

**Senior Vice President of Finance and
Operations and Chief Financial
Officer**

Faculty Senate FY27 Budget Update

Rating Agency Commentary

- “Clemson’s **robust financial flexibility, anchored in excellent expense management** and a very strong balance sheet, along with moderating capital plans, after years of significant investment, position it well against unexpected operating stress.” – Fitch
- “**Very good financial stewardship** over a multi-year period supports continued growth in reserves.” – Moody’s
- “The university’s overall financial position is **quite healthy.**” – S&P
- “A continued **focus on expense management and strategic investment** will be critical to sustain steady operating results moving forward.” – Moody’s

**Rating agencies update rating and commentary in the Fall of each year. Commentary above updated Fall 2025.*



Clemson's Debt in Context

- Clemson uses debt to invest in facilities and long-term infrastructure.
 - Examples: Advanced Materials Innovation Complex, Douthit Hills, Electrical Infrastructure, etc.
- Per SC statute, Clemson cannot and **does not** borrow for operating costs.
- When benchmarked by Moody's:
 - Clemson's debt-to-cash ratio scores "Aa"
 - Clemson's ability to service its debt ("debt service coverage") scores "Aaa"
- Debt service equates to roughly 5% of the University's total expenses.
- Clemson's Moody's rating is higher than 75% of rated public universities.

Higher Education is Transforming

- Institutions across the sector recognize the need to reallocate resources now to thrive in the future.
- The institutions below have taken measures ranging from program/service review, personnel actions, hiring freezes and comprehensive multi-year resets:

Colorado State

Cornell

Duke

Emory

Harvard

Indiana public colleges

Johns Hopkins

MIT

Michigan State

NC State

Northwestern

Ohio University

Penn State

Stanford

UC Berkeley

UC Davis

UCLA

UConn

UNC Chapel Hill

University of Chicago

University of Kansas

University of North Texas

University of Oregon

Virginia Tech



Clemson Elevate

The Time is Now

- Higher education is at a crossroads. Institutions must adjust to a changing environment and position for the future.
- A key *financial* dynamic has been slowing revenue growth.
- **Clemson starts from a position of financial strength.** We must position ourselves for future success.
- Reallocate resources from legacy spending to areas that best advance the University's mission into the future.
- Establish a strong framework quickly, enabling decisive action and disciplined execution.
- Begin with the FY27 budget: Revenue growth and expense growth must align.

FY27 Budget Overview

- Revenues and expenses will grow in FY27
 - Estimated Revenue Growth: 4.7% (\$82 million)
 - Estimated Expense Growth: 4.8% (\$81 million)
- While growth won't be uniform, Clemson will spend more money in FY27 than in FY26.
- To align revenues and expenses, reductions were applied to loaded budgets in FY27.

FY27 Budgeted Revenue Drivers

- **Student Tuition and Fees – \$14.0mm Increase**
 - Driven by inflationary OOS rate increase and modest growth in undergraduate enrollment
- **Sales and Services – \$10.0mm Increase**
 - Driven by growth in anticipated revenues in student auxiliaries
- **Grants and Contracts – \$35.5mm Increase**
 - Driven by an increase in multi-year sponsored programs and an increase in state funding for scholarships
- **State Appropriations – \$23.2mm Increase**
 - Driven by an anticipated increase in base appropriations largely designated with offsetting expenses

FY27 Budgeted Expense Drivers

- **Compensation and Benefits: \$24.3mm increase** driven primarily by:
 - \$25.9mm general compensation increase (including state-mandated increase)
 - \$6.2mm increase in sponsored programs
 - (\$3.9mm) decrease in fringe rates
- **Services and Supplies: \$41.9mm increase** due to:
 - \$31.9mm in general services, supplies, maintenance, etc.
 - \$7.4mm projected increase in information technology investments
 - \$2.6mm increase in anticipated travel

FY27 Budget: Summary and Takeaways

- Continued state partnership maintains affordability and investments in strategic priorities.
- FY27 to be the seventh year Clemson has frozen tuition and mandatory academic fees for in-state undergraduate students.
- Campus diligently partnered together to deliver an aligned budget for FY27 resulting in balanced growth in budgeted revenues and expenses.
- Administration will remain focused on financial stewardship through continued monitoring of the FY27 budget alignment reductions.



Reports

J. Cole Smith

**Executive Vice President for
Academic Affairs & Provost**

Welfare Committee

Chair: Cameron Bushnell

Finance and Infrastructure Committee

Chair: Chavez-Negrete

Scholastic Policies Committee

Chair: Jennifer Holland

1. Academic Calendar

2027-2028

August						
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Research, Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Committee

Chair: Michael Sehorn

1. 2613 – R Initiatives Report

Policy Committee

Chair: Ellen Breazel

1. PCR 2522 Libraries

Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Higher Education

Chair: Sarah White

1. Report 1

Alpha Committee

Chairs: Jace Garrett and Tyler Harvey

Committee on Committees

Chair: Jace Garrett

Student Body Government

**Faculty Senate Representative: Jameson
Sheehy**

Graduate Student Body Government

Justin Gibson, President

Matt Harrington, Chief Parliamentary Counsel

Tyler Harvey

Faculty Senate President

New Business

Announcements

National Voter Registration Day

On September 15, Clemson Votes will be hosting an event in Cox Plaza and the Sistine lawn to encourage voter registration. The link to volunteer for a shift is:



Shoutout to Ally Driver!

CLEMSON VOTES PRESENTS:

NATIONAL VOTER

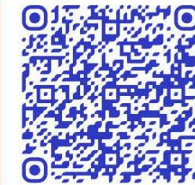
REGISTRATION DAY

SEPTEMBER 15TH

The Clemson Votes coalition is a nonpartisan entity that serves to provide students with voter registration information, education around civic responsibility, and opportunities for engagement.

By agreeing to join Clemson Votes or participate in programming on behalf of the coalition, you agree to adhere to nonpartisan work pertaining to those three specific elements.

Cox Plaza
10:00 AM - 2:00 PM



Sistine Lawn
2:00 - 4:00 PM

9/11 Stair Climb

- The 25 Years of Remembrance event in Littlejohn Coliseum is hosted by Clemson Military Affairs. They hope to have around 2,500 to attend.
- You can come at 8:30am or 10:30am for 2 short programs or come and climb stairs, walk the concourse, or just sit and reflect.



110 FLOORS OF RESOLVE 25 YEARS OF REMEMBRANCE

9-11 Memorial Stair Climb
Littlejohn Coliseum
Clemson University
September 11, 2026
8 - 11 a.m.



[Register Now!](#)



Office of
**MILITARY & VETERAN
ENGAGEMENT**
Division of Student Affairs

ATΩ



Office of
MILITARY AFFAIRS



Division of
STUDENT AFFAIRS



POLICE DEPARTMENT
Public Safety



FIRE & EMS
Public Safety



Department of
CAMPUS RECREATION
Division of Student Affairs

CLEMSON AREA
Chamber of Commerce



Faculty Senate Social Hour

Lucky Duck Bistro

* *Faculty Senate* 

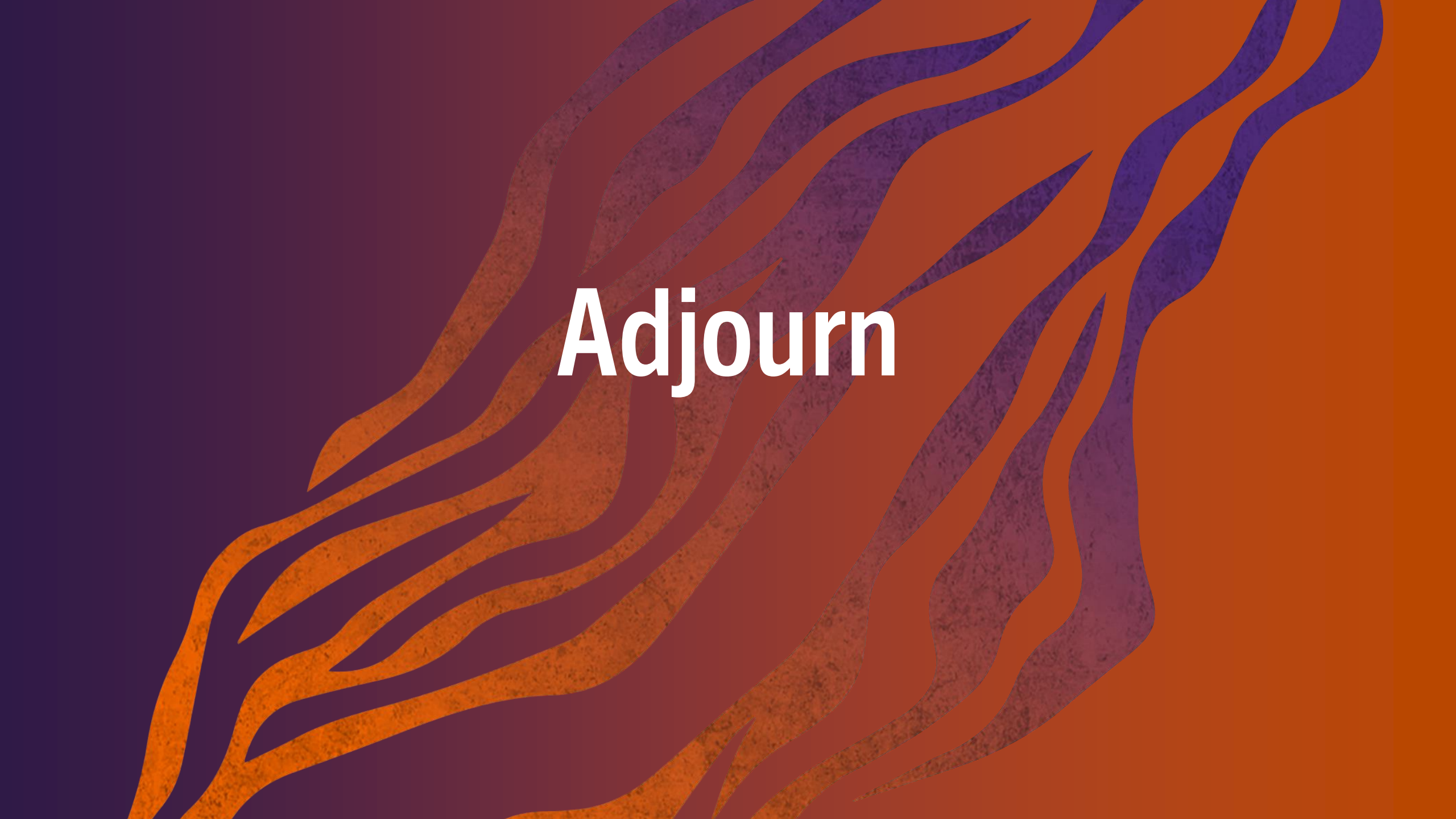
SOCIAL HOUR

Join us for conversation and cocktails
following the September 8th Senate meeting.



QUESTIONS?
Ally Driver
615-477-7623

LUCKY DUCK BISTRO
220 Madren Center Dr,
Clemson, SC 29631



Adjourn

2027-2028

August						
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Fall 2027		
Part	FDC	LDC
Full	8/23/27	12/7/27
H1	8/23/27	10/11/27
H2	10/18/27	12/7/27
A	8/23/27	9/14/27
B	9/17/27	10/8/27
C	10/13/27	11/3/27
D	11/11/27	12/7/27

Spring 2028		
Part	FDC	LDC
Full	1/19/28	5/2/28
H1	1/19/28	3/6/28
H2	3/13/28	5/2/28
A	1/19/28	2/9/28
B	2/14/28	3/3/28
C	3/8/28	4/5/28
D	4/10/28	5/1/28

Summer 2028		
Part	FDC	LDC
Full	5/18/28	8/4/28
H1	5/18/28	6/21/28
H2	7/3/28	8/4/28
A	5/18/28	6/6/28
B	6/8/28	6/26/28
C	6/28/28	7/17/28
D	7/19/28	8/4/28

Semester Begins	Commencement
Class Days	Holiday/Breaks
Exam Days (Full Semester)	

Winter 2027-28		
Part	FDC	LDC
Full	12/22/27	1/14/28
In-person	1/4/28	1/14/28

2027–2028 Calendar Changes

Modified Academic Calendar Structure

- Spring semester begins after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.
- Summer II begins on or after July 1, allowing more incoming students to participate in Summer Start.
- Existing parts of term are preserved and shifted to accommodate the revised semester start dates.
- Standard meeting times and contact hours remain unchanged.
- Creates more effective transition periods between semesters for academic planning, course preparation, and university operations.
- Shifting the start of the spring semester to the week of Martin Luther King Jr. Day gives students more time for advising appointments between the end of the winter break and the start of the Spring semester.

Winter Term

- Introduces a dedicated Winter Term between the Fall and Spring semesters.
- Creates space for short-term study abroad and courses that help students stay on track academically.
- Supports faculty participation in professional society meetings, networking events, scholarly presentations, and professional development opportunities during the first two weeks of January.
- Provides faculty with additional time to prepare for spring semester instruction.

Final Examination Schedule

- Final examination period shifts from the traditional Monday–Friday schedule to a Wednesday–Tuesday schedule.
- Includes a dedicated study day immediately preceding final examinations to support student preparation.

Student Experience

- Expands academic flexibility through an additional instructional period.
- Creates new opportunities for high-impact learning experiences while maintaining the integrity of the traditional Fall and Spring semesters.

Commencement and Grading

- Eliminates the need for candidate grade collection prior to commencement ceremonies.
- Provides additional time for faculty to finalize grades while maintaining timely degree certification.

RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP, AND CREATIVE ENDEAVORS COMMITTEE REPORT

Standing Agenda Item 2613: R-Initiatives Return on Investment Assessment

Research, Scholarship, and Creative Endeavors Committee

Committee Membership

Marc Birtwistle
Andy Duan
Christopher Chouinard
Aby Lat Soukabe Sene Harper
Maziyar Faridi
Janice Squires Withycombe
Ken Webb
Lyndsey Deaton
Josep Rutllant Labeaga
Michael Sehorn (Chair)

Charge

The Research Committee shall conduct a critical assessment of the Clemson University Division of Research R-Initiative programs to evaluate whether these initiatives provide a strong return on investment in terms of research outcomes, faculty engagement, and long-term institutional impact. The committee shall also identify opportunities for new or modified seed grant initiatives that strategically incentivize impactful research and strengthen the Clemson University research enterprise.

Executive Summary

This report evaluates Clemson University R-Initiatives and assesses effectiveness in supporting research productivity, faculty engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and long-term institutional competitiveness, all of which strengthen the research enterprise and support the Clemson University goal of achieving AAU membership. The review also compares Clemson University programs with internal research funding mechanisms at the peer and peer aspirational institutions identified by the Clemson University Faculty Senate. Since 2017 Clemson University has invested approximately \$19.5 million in R-Initiatives supporting faculty across all colleges. Clemson University reports that these initiatives contributed to more than \$433 million in submitted external proposals and more than \$64 million in external funding awards. Additional outcomes include 585 or more journal articles, manuscripts, and presentations, 24 books and book chapters, 24 art exhibitions, residencies, or fellowships, and 217 PhDs awarded. The review of peer institutions shows that internal seed funding, bridge support, interdisciplinary team development, proposal planning, and strategic research programs are common features of research-intensive universities. Several institutions provide mechanisms that are directly comparable to specific Clemson programs, while others operate narrower or unit-specific mechanisms. Faculty survey responses also indicate concern about graduate and postdoctoral support, data and publication costs, internal funding limitations, and morale during a period of federal funding uncertainty. The March 2026 Vice President for Research presentation reports that no R-Initiative awards were made in 2025-26 and none were expected in 2026-27, following an historical average of approximately 31

awards per year. The committee concludes that R-Initiatives provide substantial institutional value and recommends continued stable investment together with development of a more explicitly strategic seed funding model for high-impact, interdisciplinary, and high-potential research.

I. Clemson University R-Initiatives

Clemson University Division of Research administers a collection of internal funding programs collectively referred to as the R-Initiatives. These programs are designed to strengthen the Clemson University research enterprise by supporting proposal development, faculty collaboration, scholarly productivity, research infrastructure, and graduate student success. The R-Initiatives include CU SUCCEEDS, CU Research Fellows, CU Major Research Instrumentation, CU Core Incentivized Access, Doctoral Dissertation Completion Grants, and external review support programs. These initiatives are intended to increase faculty competitiveness for external funding while also strengthening research culture across the university.

CU SUCCEEDS contains four distinct funding mechanisms. Program One provides seed funding of up to \$10,000 for faculty initiating new research activities with the expectation that recipients will submit proposals for external funding. Program Two provides up to \$35,000 to support interdisciplinary teams developing large-scale external proposals. Program Three provides up to \$5,000 for project completion activities including manuscripts, books, artistic works, and other scholarly products. Program Four provides rapid-response support for faculty pursuing short-deadline external opportunities.

The CU Research Fellows program supports recruitment and development of research faculty, research associates, and postdoctoral researchers. The CU Major Research Instrumentation initiative supports acquisition and modernization of research equipment. The CU Core Incentivized Access program supports faculty access to university research facilities and instrumentation. The Doctoral Dissertation Completion Grants program supports graduate student completion and degree attainment.

Data provided by the Division of Research indicate that the R-Initiatives have produced substantial measurable outcomes since 2017. Clemson University reports more than 585 journal articles, manuscripts, and presentations associated with funded projects. The initiatives have also contributed to 24 books and book chapters, 24 artistic exhibitions, residencies, and fellowships, and 217 completed doctoral degrees. Clemson University reports more than \$64 million in external funding awards associated with the initiatives from approximately \$433 million in submitted proposals.

The R-Initiatives have also supported faculty engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration. Since 2017 Clemson University has funded 277 R-Initiative projects involving 438 tenure-track and tenured faculty members across all eight colleges. The March 2026 presentation reports participation rates of 27% in CAFLS, 31% in CAH, 53% in CBSHS, 7% in the College of Business, 29% in the College of Education, 44% in CECAS, 34% in the College of Science, and 42% in CAAC. These data demonstrate participation across all eight colleges while also showing substantial variation in the level of faculty participation among colleges. Clemson University reports that the initiatives have helped create new interdisciplinary collaborations and sustained research partnerships that continue beyond the initial internal award period.

The March 2026 Vice President for Research presentation reports no R-Initiative awards in 2025-26 and no awards expected in 2026-27, compared with an historical average of approximately 31 R-Initiative awards per year. Clemson University public materials continue to describe CU SUCCEEDS and prior R-Initiative competitions. Accordingly, the recent period is best characterized as a substantial interruption or suspension of R-Initiative funding rather than permanent termination of CU SUCCEEDS.

The return on investment associated with several R-Initiatives is particularly notable. Clemson University reports strong returns for CU Major Research Instrumentation, CU SUCCEEDS Program Two collaborative awards, and project completion initiatives. Several programs generated returns that substantially exceeded the original university investment. These outcomes indicate that the R-Initiatives function as strategic research investments rather than solely as internal support programs.

II. Peer and Peer Aspirational Institution Programs

The Faculty Senate peer framework identifies six land-grant R1 peer institutions at a similar enrollment scale: University of Delaware, Auburn University, Kansas State University, University of Nebraska Lincoln, University of Arkansas, and Oklahoma State University. The peer aspirational group includes Michigan State University, Purdue University, Rutgers University New Brunswick, Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Arizona, University of Florida, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of Maryland College Park, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and University of Missouri Columbia. The review below focuses on internal funding mechanisms that most closely relate to seed funding, interdisciplinary collaboration, bridge support, proposal development, infrastructure, commercialization, and strategic research priorities.

University of Delaware operates university-wide internal seed grant programs through the Research Development Office. The General University Research program supports research and creative projects intended to grow and sustain scholarly development, with preference for early-career faculty and encouragement for interdisciplinary projects. The University of Delaware Research Foundation Strategic Initiatives program supports innovative, collaborative, high-impact scientific research aligned with strategic priorities and pairs an untenured tenure-track faculty member with a senior faculty member who serves as mentor and collaborator. The Research Development Office also provides proposal development support for large and multi-department proposals.

Auburn University has a documented Research Support Program within the Samuel Ginn College of Engineering that provides strategic seed funding for early-stage investigators and faculty who seek to strengthen funding portfolios or pivot to new research areas. The available evidence located for this review did not establish a university-wide mechanism equivalent in breadth to the Clemson R-Initiatives. Auburn University has nevertheless articulated a broader institutional strategy that uses seed funding and research investment in identified strategic areas.

Kansas State University has established the Ad Astra Intramural Grants Program, which is especially relevant to the proposed Clemson model. Ad Astra consolidates internal funding into Launch Awards for seed projects, Thrust Awards for competitive proposal resubmissions, Orbit Awards for interdisciplinary teams, and Touchdown Awards for commercialization. Current annual allocations include \$25,000 Launch awards, \$50,000 Thrust awards, and \$250,000 Orbit awards.

The program uses explicit criteria for strategic alignment, agency priority alignment, external funding or commercialization potential, team composition, feasibility, and broader impact. Two annual competitions provide predictable access to funding.

The University of Nebraska Lincoln operates Rapid Response Grants for timely, short-term needs when other funding sources are not available. Awards can support activities that maintain or grow research programs, increase external funding competitiveness, or enhance scholarly stature. The program provides a direct comparison for rapid-response support within CU SUCCEEDS Program Four.

The University of Arkansas has used internal seed funding to support collaborative and strategic research. In 2025 a campus research collaborative awarded seed grants to eight interdisciplinary teams with strong potential for future external funding and proof-of-concept outcomes. Earlier university-wide Arts and Humanities Seed Grant programs also supported faculty research and creative activity, with particular emphasis on areas where external funding opportunities were limited. These examples indicate a sustained use of seed funding to build collaborations and external funding capacity.

Oklahoma State University provides internal funding at both university and college levels. University-level programs include Research Grants in Humanities, Arts, and Design-Based Disciplines and a renovation program for critical research facilities. The research facility program gives stronger consideration to projects with broad user bases, interdisciplinary activity, and significant cost-sharing. College-level seed programs also provide up to \$10,000 for research and creative scholarly activities. The overall structure is broader than a single seed grant but less integrated than the Clemson R-Initiatives portfolio.

Michigan State University offers several internal research funding programs. The Discretionary Funding Initiative is particularly relevant because it provides bridge funding for tenure-stream faculty who need additional studies to strengthen an unsuccessful but nearly fundable proposal for resubmission to the same agency. Awards can reach \$50,000, with half provided through the central program and half through a college or unit. MSU also supports interdisciplinary seed projects through research centers and programs.

Purdue University provides several mechanisms that demonstrate a strong emphasis on strategic research development. The current Re-SPARK program offers up to \$150,000 to Purdue-led research teams pursuing center-scale external proposals of at least \$7 million. The program uses phased internal investment with the second installment contingent on satisfactory completion of initial deliverables. Purdue has also funded high-impact scholarly work and continues to coordinate internal funding competitions through the Office of Research.

Rutgers University provides internal funding opportunities including bridge funding, Research Council Awards, HealthAdvance, TechAdvance, and other mechanisms. The Rutgers University New Brunswick review confirms a broad internal funding environment, although the publicly available information located for this review does not show one centralized program that combines all research development stages in a structure equivalent to Clemson R-Initiatives. Rutgers University Newark separately operates a Chancellor Seed Grant program focused on interdisciplinary collaboration and research growth.

Texas A&M University operates the Targeted Proposal Teams initiative, which provides three mechanisms. Collaborative Seed Grants support high-risk, high-reward interdisciplinary research with awards of up to \$60,000. Proposal Planning Grants provide up to \$100,000 for interdisciplinary teams preparing large-scale proposals. Grants on the Edge provide up to \$25,000 or \$50,000 for strengthening previously unfunded proposals based on reviewer feedback. Texas A&M has also used earlier Research Leadership Fellowships to develop junior research leaders. This portfolio is a close comparator for a strategically differentiated Clemson seed program.

The Ohio State University operates the President's Research Excellence program. Current Accelerator awards provide up to \$75,000 for 18-month projects involving small teams pursuing curiosity-driven, high-risk, high-reward pilot-scale research toward an identified proposal target. Catalyst awards support medium or large interdisciplinary teams pursuing high-impact research toward national-leadership or strategically significant proposals, with recent awards reaching \$300,000. Funded teams are expected to submit external funding proposals by the end of the project period or the next appropriate deadline.

Pennsylvania State University supports interdisciplinary seed funding through research institutes. The Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences seed programs emphasize high-impact and innovative research, new collaborations, milestone-based progress, and potential for significant external return. Projects are expected to define objectives and benchmarks that lead toward larger externally funded initiatives.

The University of Arizona maintains Faculty Seed Grants that provide up to \$15,000 for short-term support. The program includes an Early Career track and a Mid-Career track, with emphasis on generating data for new external proposals or new lines of scholarship and on helping mid-career faculty develop research directions that may lead to future center or institute leadership. Arizona also maintains numerous unit-level and institute-level seed programs.

The University of Florida operates the Research Opportunity Seed Fund, which provides up to \$100,000 over two years for new multidisciplinary research projects that are likely to attract additional extramural funding. The program explicitly evaluates new collaborations, novelty, meaningful contributions, funding potential, and high impact. This program is one of the clearest peer aspirational examples of a high-impact interdisciplinary seed mechanism.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign maintains multiple seed programs through central units and research institutes. Examples include the Campus Research Board and interdisciplinary seed programs through institutes such as the Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment and the Beckman Institute. The Beckman Research Seed Grants can provide up to \$150,000 for two years, with continuation based on progress and an expectation of externally funded research proposals. Illinois also operates proposal development and limited submission support.

The University of Maryland College Park states that internal faculty research programs are a key component of efforts to expand research activity, visibility, volume, and impact. Current internal programs are designed to enable innovative research, incentivize large, complex, and high-impact initiatives, and improve competitiveness for extramural awards. The Maryland Catalyst Fund and other internal programs provide examples of strategic research investment, although some individual mechanisms vary by cycle and unit.

The University of Minnesota Twin Cities maintains a broad internal funding environment that includes interdisciplinary grants, center and institute seed programs, junior faculty pilot awards, and impact-focused opportunities. The Institute on the Environment, for example, lists an Impact Goals competition with awards up to \$200,000 for interdisciplinary work. The structure is decentralized across research centers and institutes rather than consolidated into one university-wide R-Initiative program.

The University of Missouri operates Research Council Grants through the Division of Research, Innovation and Impact. Awards support research, scholarship, and creative activities, including pilot data for external proposals, peer-reviewed research, books, and artistic work. Current grants range up to \$15,000, and annual outcome reports are required. The program provides a direct comparator for seed funding and scholarly completion support, although the award scale and structure are narrower than the Clemson portfolio.

III. Summary of Peer and Peer Aspirational Institution Programs

The expanded peer review demonstrates that internal research investment is a common strategy across research-intensive universities, but the mechanisms differ substantially in scale and purpose. Most institutions reviewed provide at least one form of seed funding, proposal development support, bridge funding, interdisciplinary team development, or research infrastructure investment. The strongest models define an explicit pathway from internal investment to external funding, commercialization, major scholarly outcomes, or a strategic institutional priority.

Several institutions provide especially clear examples of differentiated internal investment. Kansas State University uses Launch, Thrust, Orbit, and Touchdown awards to support distinct stages from new research directions through resubmission, interdisciplinary team development, and commercialization. Texas A&M University separates Collaborative Seed Grants, Proposal Planning Grants, and Grants on the Edge. The Ohio State University uses Accelerator and Catalyst awards to distinguish pilot-scale high-risk research from larger high-impact interdisciplinary projects. The University of Florida evaluates new collaborations, novelty, meaningful contributions, funding potential, and high impact. Penn State uses milestones and expected external return. These examples suggest that the most strategic internal programs do more than fund research. They define the type of research opportunity being supported and the outcome expected from the investment.

The review also identifies bridge and resubmission mechanisms that are relevant to periods of federal funding uncertainty. Michigan State University provides bridge funds for nearly fundable proposals requiring additional studies. Purdue University provides substantial internal support for center-scale opportunities. The University of Nebraska Lincoln provides rapid-response funding for short-term needs that can preserve research momentum or improve external competitiveness. These mechanisms suggest that internal research support can be used not only to initiate research but also to preserve momentum when external funding is delayed, unavailable, or highly competitive.

The peer review also demonstrates that Clemson University R-Initiatives remain distinctive in breadth. Clemson University combines seed funding, collaborative proposal development, rapid response, project completion, research faculty support, major instrumentation, core access, and dissertation completion within a unified framework. Several peers have a comparable individual mechanism, but fewer have a portfolio that integrates this many functions under one institutional umbrella.

IV. Comparison of Clemson R-Initiatives with Peer Institution Programs

Clemson University compares favorably with peer and peer aspirational institutions in internal research investment. CU SUCCEEDS Program One is comparable to seed programs at Purdue University, Michigan State University, the University of Nebraska Lincoln, the University of Arizona, and the University of Missouri. CU SUCCEEDS Program Two is comparable to interdisciplinary team and proposal planning programs at Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, the University of Florida, Illinois, Penn State, and Kansas State University. CU SUCCEEDS Program Four is comparable to the rapid-response model at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. CU Major Research Instrumentation and CU Core Incentivized Access have parallels at Illinois, Florida, Purdue, Oklahoma State University, and other institutions with equipment or core facility programs.

Clemson University also has an opportunity to strengthen strategic differentiation. Several peer programs use explicit criteria for high-risk, high-reward research, strategic alignment, external funding potential, major societal impact, or center-scale opportunity. Kansas State University, Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, the University of Florida, Penn State, and Maryland provide particularly useful examples. These programs suggest that a future Clemson mechanism could complement existing CU SUCCEEDS awards by reserving a portion of internal investment for research with unusually high potential for institutional impact, external funding growth, major interdisciplinary collaboration, commercialization, or leadership in a defined strategic area.

The peer review does not support the conclusion that Auburn University, Oklahoma State University, Rutgers University, or the University of Missouri lack all comparable internal funding. Each has identified mechanisms. The more accurate conclusion is that these institutions do not appear, based on the publicly available programs reviewed, to have a single university-wide portfolio that matches the full scope and integration of Clemson University R-Initiatives. This distinction is important because Clemson University should benchmark individual mechanisms against peer practices while also recognizing the broader value generated by the integrated portfolio.

V. Faculty Research Support, R-Initiatives, and Funding Uncertainty

The faculty survey conducted in response to budget constraints identified several themes directly relevant to R-Initiatives and research support. University-wide responses identified graduate student and postdoctoral support limitations in 29.2 percent of responses, data, software, and publication costs in 20.8 percent, internal funds, bridge support, and incentives in 16.0 percent, and morale, trust, and retention concerns in 8.3 percent. The survey indicates that faculty are concerned about research continuity and institutional support during a period of uncertainty in federal research funding.

College-level responses reinforce the importance of internal research support. The College of Behavioral, Social and Health Sciences reported internal funding, bridge, and incentive concerns in 46.7 percent of responses. Engineering, Computing and Applied Sciences reported internal funding concerns as the leading identified theme at 27.3 percent. Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences reported graduate and postdoctoral support concerns in 57.1 percent of responses. Education reported graduate and postdoctoral support concerns in 75.0 percent of responses. Business reported data, software, and publication cost concerns in 55.2 percent of responses. These

patterns indicate that the need for research support is broad, but the most pressing type of support varies across colleges.

Continued reductions or interruptions in R-Initiative funding could therefore have consequences beyond the direct loss of small research awards. Faculty may interpret continued reductions as evidence of reduced institutional commitment to research. The combination of federal funding uncertainty and reduced internal support may discourage faculty from pursuing innovative or high-risk research, delay generation of preliminary data, limit graduate and postdoctoral support, and weaken confidence in long-term research continuity. Stable R-Initiative funding can provide a visible institutional commitment to faculty research during periods when external funding mechanisms are less predictable.

VI. Strategic Opportunities for New or Modified R-Initiatives

The peer review supports development of a new or modified seed funding mechanism that explicitly targets high-impact research rather than simply increasing the amount available through existing programs. Clemson University could establish a tiered Strategic Research Accelerator and Catalyst program within the R-Initiatives framework. An Accelerator award could provide approximately \$25,000 to \$75,000 for small teams or individual investigators developing high-risk, high-reward ideas, generating preliminary data, opening a new research direction, or responding to an emerging external opportunity. A Catalyst award could provide approximately \$100,000 to \$250,000 for interdisciplinary teams pursuing major federal, foundation, industry, center, or other strategic opportunities. Final award levels should be determined by available institutional resources and a review of expected return.

A new strategic program should use evaluation criteria that make the institutional return explicit. Criteria could include research significance and innovation, strategic relevance, external funding potential, interdisciplinary collaboration, feasibility, broader impact, and a credible pathway to a defined external proposal or other high-value scholarly outcome. Proposals should identify the external sponsor or funding pathway when applicable. Funded teams should establish milestones at the beginning of an award and provide a concise outcome report at completion. A second-stage award could be contingent on completion of the first-stage milestones, similar to the phased approach used by Purdue University and the milestone structure used by Penn State and Kansas State University.

Clemson University should also consider a complementary Research Continuity or Bridge mechanism for faculty with externally reviewed proposals that show strong funding potential but require additional data, analysis, or other work before resubmission. This mechanism would draw on practices at Michigan State University and Texas A&M University and would provide targeted support during periods of federal funding uncertainty. A bridge mechanism should be selective and tied to documented external review, a defined resubmission plan, and a clear timetable for the next external proposal.

The proposed structure would not replace CU SUCCEEDS. It would create a higher-impact pathway within the R-Initiatives portfolio. CU SUCCEEDS Program One could continue to support broad faculty access to small-scale seed funding. The new Accelerator and Catalyst structure would provide larger awards for strategically significant projects. A separate Continuity or Bridge mechanism would protect promising research programs that have already demonstrated external

funding potential. This segmentation would make the purpose of each internal funding mechanism clearer and improve the ability to evaluate return on investment by program type.

VII. Conclusion

The committee concludes that Clemson University R-Initiatives have provided substantial returns on institutional investment and have contributed positively to research productivity, faculty collaboration, graduate education, and institutional research culture. Since 2017 Clemson University has invested approximately \$19.5 million in these initiatives, with reported outcomes of more than \$64 million in external awards and more than \$433 million in submitted proposals, in addition to significant scholarly, artistic, graduate, and collaborative outcomes.

The broader peer review confirms that internal seed funding and research development mechanisms are widely used at research-intensive universities. Clemson University is not unusual in making internal research investments, but the breadth and integration of the Clemson R-Initiative portfolio compare favorably with the programs reviewed. At the same time, peer institutions provide useful models for making internal investment more strategic. Kansas State University, Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, the University of Florida, Penn State, Purdue University, and Michigan State University demonstrate differentiated mechanisms for high-risk research, interdisciplinary collaboration, proposal resubmission, center-scale development, and external funding growth.

The committee further concludes that faculty survey findings, broad participation across all eight colleges, and the recent interruption in R-Initiative awards make continuation of internal research support particularly important during a period of uncertainty in federal research funding. Concerns regarding graduate and postdoctoral support, internal funding, bridge support, research continuity, and morale suggest that R-Initiatives serve both an economic function and an institutional signaling function. Stable internal support communicates commitment to research and gives faculty a mechanism to sustain productive work when external funding is delayed or highly competitive. The absence of R-Initiative awards during 2025-26 and the expectation of no awards during 2026-27 further demonstrate the practical consequences of an interruption in this support system.

VIII. Recommendations

1. Clemson University should restore and maintain stable annual funding for the R-Initiatives to ensure continuity in faculty research development, proposal competitiveness, graduate support, and research productivity.
2. Clemson University should establish a tiered Strategic Research Accelerator and Catalyst program within the R-Initiatives portfolio. Accelerator awards should support high-risk, high-reward pilot research and emerging research directions. Catalyst awards should support larger interdisciplinary teams pursuing high-impact research and major external funding opportunities.
3. Clemson University should establish a selective Research Continuity or Bridge mechanism for externally reviewed proposals that demonstrate strong funding potential but require additional data or development before resubmission. Eligibility should require documented external review, a defined resubmission strategy, and measurable milestones.

4. Clemson University should expand support for interdisciplinary collaboration and strategic proposal development, particularly for teams pursuing center-scale or other high-value external opportunities. Program design should consider the models used by Kansas State University, Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, Purdue University, Florida, and Penn State.
5. Clemson University should maintain and strengthen support for early-career faculty and should consider a targeted pathway for mid-career faculty developing new research directions or future center leadership. The University of Arizona and University of Delaware provide useful examples.
6. Clemson University should continue rapid-response support for time-sensitive external opportunities and should evaluate whether centralized proposal-development support can complement rapid-response funding. The University of Nebraska Lincoln provides a direct rapid-response analogue, while Delaware and Purdue illustrate stronger centralized research development support.
7. Clemson University should continue support for major equipment, core-facility access, and specialized research infrastructure when an internal investment has a documented connection to faculty productivity or external funding competitiveness.
8. Clemson University should develop a formal long-term assessment framework for R-Initiatives. The framework should report outcomes by program and should include internal investment, external proposals submitted, external awards received, scholarly outputs, graduate outcomes, interdisciplinary participation, new collaborations, commercialization activity when applicable, and follow-on funding.

Clemson University should review differences in college-level R-Initiative participation and conduct targeted outreach in colleges with lower participation to identify barriers to access, improve awareness, and ensure that future funding mechanisms are available across disciplines and colleges.

9. Clemson University should use outcome data to determine future allocations among existing and new R-Initiatives. Programs that demonstrate strong external funding, scholarly, graduate, or institutional outcomes should be considered for expansion. Programs with weaker outcomes should be reviewed for redesign, consolidation, or discontinuation.
10. Clemson University should communicate the purpose and outcomes of R-Initiatives more visibly to faculty. Regular announcements of funded projects, examples of external awards that followed internal support, faculty and student outcomes, and annual program-level return metrics would reinforce the value of internal research investment and provide greater transparency regarding institutional research priorities.

Suggested Approach for Promoting New R-Initiatives

Promotion should present the new mechanisms as an institutional investment in faculty research rather than as another administrative grant competition. The Division of Research could launch the program with a university-wide call that explains the distinction among seed, accelerator, catalyst, and bridge mechanisms and provides examples of successful projects. A short annual R-Initiatives Impact Report could highlight internal investment, external proposals, external awards,

scholarly outcomes, graduate student outcomes, interdisciplinary teams, and faculty testimonials. Faculty information sessions could be organized through colleges and research centers, with particular attention to early-career faculty and disciplines that have fewer external funding opportunities. The program should also publicize funded teams and subsequent external awards so that faculty can see a visible pathway from internal support to research impact.

Source note: The faculty participation figures and recent R-Initiative award history in this report are drawn from the March 2026 Clemson University Division of Research update presented to the Faculty Senate.

Selected Peer Research Funding Sources Reviewed

Clemson University Division of Research, Research Update, Faculty Senate, March 2026: R-Initiative deliverables, participation, award history, and funding interruption information.

Clemson University Division of Research, Faculty Succeeds:

<https://www.clemson.edu/research/division-of-research/resources/r-init-sub-pages/faculty-succeeds.html>

- University of Delaware: <https://research.udel.edu/research-development/funding-opportunities/internal-funding/>
- Auburn University: <https://eng.auburn.edu/admin/erad/proposal/funding>
- Kansas State University: <https://www.k-state.edu/research/faculty/funding/internal-grants/ad-adstra-awards/index.html>
- University of Nebraska Lincoln: <https://research.unl.edu/internalfunding/rapid-response-grants/>
- University of Arkansas: <https://news.uark.edu/articles/79733/campus-research-collaborative-announces-seed-grants-to-interdisciplinary-teams>
- Oklahoma State University: <https://research.okstate.edu/faculty-resources/internal-funding-programs.html>
- Michigan State University: <https://research.msu.edu/discretionary-funding-initiative>
- Purdue University: <https://research.purdue.edu/resources-for-researchers/find-funding/re-spark-program/>
- Rutgers University: <https://research.rutgers.edu/faculty-staff/find-funding>
- Texas A&M University: <https://research.tamu.edu/funding/targeted-proposal-teams/>
- The Ohio State University: <https://research.osu.edu/building-your-research-program/find-funding/presidents-research-excellence-program>
- Pennsylvania State University: <https://www.huck.psu.edu/seed-funding-large-proposal-catalysis/seed-funding>
- University of Arizona: <https://research.arizona.edu/development/find-funding/internal-funding/faculty-seed-grants>
- University of Florida: <https://research.ufl.edu/services/srd/research-seed-funds>
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign: <https://research.illinois.edu/funding-proposal-support/campus-funding-programs>
- University of Maryland College Park: <https://research.umd.edu/resources/internal-funding>
- University of Minnesota Twin Cities: https://apps.research.umn.edu/A/Intramural/internal_funding.aspx

- University of Missouri: <https://research.missouri.edu/internal-funding/research-council-grants>

APPENDIX I

Background report: Clemson R-Initiatives and Peer Comparisons

Standing Agenda Item 2613: R-Initiatives Return on Investment Assessment

A. Purpose and Scope

This appendix provides the supporting background for the assessment of Clemson University R-Initiatives required by Standing Agenda Item 2613. The review examines the purposes and outcomes of Clemson University R-Initiatives, considers the effect of recent reductions in internal research funding, compares Clemson programs with internal research funding mechanisms at Faculty Senate peer and peer aspirational institutions, and identifies opportunities for new or modified initiatives that could strategically incentivize impactful research. The appendix is intended to provide context for the conclusions and recommendations presented in the main report.

B. Clemson University R-Initiatives Assessment

Clemson University Division of Research administers a portfolio of internal research support programs collectively referred to as the R-Initiatives. The portfolio includes CU SUCCEEDS, CU Research Fellows, CU Major Research Instrumentation, CU Core Incentivized Access, Doctoral Dissertation Completion Grants, and external proposal review support. These programs address multiple stages of research development, including initiation of new projects, interdisciplinary proposal development, project completion, rapid response to short-notice funding opportunities, faculty and postdoctoral research capacity, research equipment, core facility access, and graduate student completion.

CU SUCCEEDS provides four related mechanisms. Program One provides up to \$10,000 for research initiation and seed activities, with an external proposal submission as a required final deliverable. Program Two provides up to \$35,000 for multidisciplinary teams preparing significant external proposals. Program Three provides up to \$5,000 for completion of scholarly or creative products, including manuscripts, books, artistic work, and proposal resubmissions. Program Four provides up to \$5,000 for short-notice external opportunities and accepts applications on a rolling basis. Clemson describes CU SUCCEEDS as a competitive internal funding initiative intended to position faculty for success at different stages of the research process. [1]

Clemson University data indicate that the R-Initiatives have produced substantial outputs since 2017. The Division of Research reports approximately \$19.5 million in total investment, including approximately \$15.5 million from the Vice President for Research share. Reported outcomes include more than \$433 million in external proposals submitted and more than \$64 million in external funding received. The programs have also been associated with more than 585 journal articles, manuscripts, and presentations, 24 books and book chapters, 24 artistic exhibitions, residencies, and fellowships, and 217 doctoral degrees. These outcomes provide evidence that internal funding has supported both externally oriented research development and broader scholarly and creative activity.

The faculty participation data indicate that R-Initiatives have reached faculty in all eight colleges. The Division of Research reports 277 awarded R-Initiative projects and 438 tenure-track and tenured faculty members participating across the colleges. The March 2026 presentation reports

participation rates of 27 percent in CAFLS, 31 percent in CAH, 53 percent in CBSHS, 7 percent in the College of Business, 29 percent in the College of Education, 44 percent in CECAS, 34 percent in the College of Science, and 42 percent in CAAC. These figures provide the appropriate college-level context for the 438 faculty participants. The March 2026 presentation does not provide a single university-wide denominator for all tenure-track and tenured faculty, so 438 should be used as the primary university-wide participation measure rather than converted into a university-wide participation percentage.

C. Recent Funding Interruption and Faculty Impact

The March 2026 Vice President for Research presentation provides important context for interpreting current R-Initiative outcomes. The presentation reports that Clemson University historically awarded an average of approximately 31 R-Initiative projects each year, but no awards were made in 2025-26 and no awards were expected in 2026-27. This recent interruption is significant because it removes a recurring source of internal support that faculty have used to initiate research, develop preliminary data, form collaborations, and strengthen external proposals. The committee should acknowledge this interruption explicitly because the absence of recent awards makes the historical return-on-investment data particularly important. It also creates an opportunity to assess the effect of withdrawing internal research support during a period of uncertainty in federal funding. Faculty survey responses identified limitations in internal funding and bridge support as a recurring research concern, along with graduate and postdoctoral support needs, research operating costs, and morale and retention concerns. The absence of R-Initiative funding can therefore affect more than the number of seed projects supported. It can affect faculty perceptions of institutional commitment, research continuity, graduate support, and willingness to pursue emerging or high-risk opportunities.

The March 2026 Vice President for Research presentation reports no R-Initiative awards in 2025-26 and none expected in 2026-27. Clemson University public webpages continue to describe CU SUCCEEDS and list prior calls and awardees. The committee therefore recommends describing the recent period as a substantial interruption or suspension of R-Initiative funding rather than stating that CU SUCCEEDS has been permanently abolished.

D. Peer and Peer Aspirational Institution Comparisons

The Clemson University Faculty Senate peer group consists of the University of Delaware, Auburn University, Kansas State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Arkansas, and Oklahoma State University. The peer aspirational group consists of Michigan State University, Purdue University, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Arizona, the University of Florida, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the University of Maryland College Park, the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and the University of Missouri. The review focused on university-level or centrally visible internal mechanisms that support seed research, interdisciplinary collaboration, proposal development, research infrastructure, research continuity, or transition from internal support to external funding.

E. Peer and Peer Aspirational Programs

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln provides one of the closest functional comparisons to the rapid-response component of Clemson R-Initiatives. UNL Rapid Response Grants provide

support for time-sensitive and unanticipated needs when other funding is unavailable. Eligible activities include development of research partnerships, equipment needs, and activities intended to increase competitiveness for external funding. The program therefore resembles Clemson CU SUCCEEDS Program Four, although UNL frames the mechanism more broadly around maintaining or growing a faculty research program. [3]

The University of Delaware operates university-wide seed grant competitions through the General University Research and University of Delaware Research Foundation programs. The Research Development Office also provides centralized proposal development assistance for large or multidisciplinary proposals. The combination of internal seed funding and structured proposal development is comparable to Clemson CU SUCCEEDS Program One and Program Two, while the centralized proposal development function provides a potential model for strengthening the proposal support infrastructure associated with R-Initiatives. [4][5]

Kansas State University provides a particularly useful model for a differentiated internal funding portfolio. The Ad Astra Intramural Grants Program includes Launch Awards for seed projects, Thrust Awards for external proposal resubmissions, Orbit Awards for interdisciplinary teams pursuing center-scale opportunities, and Touchdown Awards for commercialization. The program is explicitly organized around different stages of research development and includes defined annual allocations. This structure provides a strong model for Clemson if the goal is to distinguish exploratory research, proposal resubmission, large interdisciplinary initiatives, and commercialization rather than placing all activities within a single seed category. [6]

Purdue University maintains internal research support mechanisms that emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration, proposal development, equipment needs, and early career faculty support. These mechanisms resemble several elements of Clemson R-Initiatives but appear more distributed across research development and strategic funding programs. Purdue therefore provides a useful comparison for linking internal awards to larger research center and external funding strategies.

Michigan State University operates internal funding programs that include research development support, proposal resubmission assistance, center development, and interdisciplinary programs. The Michigan State model is particularly relevant because some mechanisms require applicants to identify external funding opportunities or address reviewer concerns from previously submitted proposals. This approach provides a basis for tying continued internal investment to specific external funding pathways.

Texas A&M University offers a particularly strong model for strategic seed funding through the Targeted Proposal Teams program. The 2026 program includes Collaborative Seed Grants for high-risk, high-reward early-stage projects, Proposal Planning Grants for interdisciplinary teams preparing large-scale external proposals, and Grants on the Edge for previously unfunded proposals that need additional data or revisions based on reviewer feedback. The program allocates approximately \$4.5 million across these categories. This structure closely parallels Clemson CU SUCCEEDS Program One, Program Two, and aspects of Program Three while providing more explicit differentiation based on research maturity and external funding opportunity. [7][8]

The Ohio State University provides another strong model for strategic internal research investment. Its President's Research Excellence Program differentiates smaller Accelerator awards from larger Catalyst awards and places emphasis on novel, high-risk, high-reward research,

interdisciplinary collaboration, high-impact research, and potential for external funding. This model demonstrates how a university can use different award levels and selection criteria to move beyond general seed funding toward strategic institutional investment.

The University of Florida provides an especially relevant model for interdisciplinary and high-impact seed funding. The Research Opportunity Seed Fund provides up to \$100,000 over two years for new research projects likely to attract additional external funding. Evaluation criteria include new collaborations, novel research, meaningful contributions, funding potential, and high impact. These criteria provide a strong potential model for a Clemson strategic seed program because they identify impact and funding potential as explicit evaluation criteria rather than implicit expectations. [9]

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign provides internal research funding and a centralized process for limited submissions and proposal development. The research office maintains internal opportunities while also supporting faculty with major external competitions. Illinois therefore provides a model in which internal research support is connected to an organized research development infrastructure. [10]

Pennsylvania State University uses institute-based seed funding to support interdisciplinary research aligned with institutional research themes. The 2026 Institute of Energy and the Environment seed competition, for example, supported collaborative projects involving researchers across numerous colleges, departments, and campuses. This illustrates how thematic institutes can use seed awards to build larger interdisciplinary research communities. [11]

The University of Maryland provides targeted seed mechanisms through interdisciplinary research institutes. The Artificial Intelligence Interdisciplinary Institute at Maryland offers a Research Seed Award Program for innovative interdisciplinary projects addressing defined societal challenges. The program emphasizes high-impact early-stage research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and potential for future external funding. This is a useful model for Clemson strategic seed initiatives tied to institutional research strengths or major societal challenges. [12]

The University of Minnesota provides examples of strategically focused seed funding. The National Security Research Institute Seed Grant Program supports impactful science and technology projects intended to lead to successful external funding while also supporting interdisciplinary collaboration, institutional impact, and student preparation. This demonstrates how seed funding can be explicitly connected to external funding, workforce development, and a defined institutional priority. [13]

The University of Arizona operates a Research Development Grant Program that supports staged research development. The program can provide early support for individual researchers, nurture new ideas, build interdisciplinary teams, and strengthen scientific capacity through equipment. The program explicitly expects internal funding to be strategically leveraged toward external proposal submission and additional awards. This closely aligns with the Clemson objective of using internal investment to create a path toward greater external competitiveness. [14]

Rutgers University-New Brunswick maintains Office of the Chancellor seed funding projects that emerge from research ideation forums. The program provides seed grants to interdisciplinary research teams and demonstrates a process in which idea generation, team

formation, and internal funding are connected. This provides a useful model for Clemson to strengthen the relationship between faculty ideation and R-Initiative competitions. [15]

The University of Arkansas provides a particularly strong new example among the peer institutions. In 2026 the I3R Watershed Grants Program awarded \$1 million in seed funding to 15 interdisciplinary research teams. The program was designed to spark new collaborations, accelerate translational research, position teams for competitive external funding, and address complex societal challenges. Projects were expected to demonstrate potential for sustained impact beyond the one-year seed funding period. This mechanism is closely aligned with the type of strategic, high-impact seed investment contemplated for Clemson University and strengthens the case for a Clemson accelerator or catalyst model. [16]

Auburn University maintains internal funding opportunities through the Office of Research and university units, although the reviewed material did not identify a single integrated portfolio that combines the range of functions included within Clemson R-Initiatives. Oklahoma State University also maintains internal grants, including seed funding available through the College of Arts and Sciences and specialized university initiatives. Rutgers University-New Brunswick has Chancellor-supported interdisciplinary seed projects, while the University of Missouri maintains internal research funding opportunities. These institutions therefore should not be characterized as having no internal funding. Instead, no comparable integrated university-wide mechanism was apparent in the public materials reviewed.

F. Summary of the Peer Comparison

The peer review demonstrates that internal research investment is a common strategy at research-intensive universities, but the organization of these programs varies considerably. The most relevant peer practices fall into several recurring categories. Seed programs provide preliminary support for new research directions and data generation. Interdisciplinary programs support faculty teams and position them for large or center-scale external proposals. Resubmission programs provide focused support for externally reviewed proposals that were not funded. Rapid-response programs address short-notice opportunities or unexpected research needs. Infrastructure programs support equipment and core research capacity. Strategic programs increasingly emphasize high-impact research, institutional priorities, external funding potential, and measurable milestones.

Clemson R-Initiatives compare favorably because they combine many of these functions in a coordinated portfolio. Clemson CU SUCCEEDS Program One resembles seed programs at Purdue, Michigan State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the University of Delaware. Program Two resembles interdisciplinary proposal planning programs at Texas A&M University, Ohio State University, the University of Florida, and Pennsylvania State University. Program Three resembles resubmission and project completion support found in several peer systems. Program Four closely resembles the rapid-response mechanism at Nebraska. CU Major Research Instrumentation resembles equipment programs at Purdue, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona. The Clemson portfolio therefore has considerable breadth even where individual components are not unique.

The strongest opportunity for modification is not simply to add another general seed grant. Several peer institutions have moved toward differentiated programs that identify the stage of research development, the level of potential impact, the degree of interdisciplinarity, and the likelihood of external funding. Kansas State, Texas A&M, Ohio State, Florida, Arizona, Maryland,

and Minnesota provide useful examples of this approach. The evidence supports consideration of a Clemson strategic funding model that complements CU SUCCEEDS rather than duplicating existing programs. The participation data also suggest that future program design and outreach should examine differences among colleges so that new or modified initiatives encourage broad access while still prioritizing high-potential research.

G. Potential New or Modified R-Initiatives

A Clemson Strategic Research Accelerator could provide smaller awards for emerging or high-risk research that requires preliminary data, proof-of-concept work, new collaborations, or development of a new research direction. Awards could be designed for projects that are not yet ready for a major external proposal but show credible potential for significant scholarly impact or future external support. Evaluation criteria could include novelty, significance, feasibility, potential impact, and a clear plan for moving the project toward external funding or another defined scholarly outcome. This mechanism would build on CU SUCCEEDS Program One while making the strategic purpose and evaluation criteria more explicit.

A Clemson Strategic Research Catalyst could provide larger awards for interdisciplinary teams pursuing high-impact research opportunities that align with major external funding opportunities or institutional research strengths. Eligible projects could target center-scale opportunities, major federal initiatives, large foundation opportunities, or other external competitions where a substantial internal investment would materially improve competitiveness. Evaluation could emphasize the significance of the problem, strength of the interdisciplinary team, potential for external funding, institutional differentiation, and anticipated long-term impact.

A Clemson Research Continuity or Bridge Award could provide temporary support for productive research programs affected by gaps or uncertainty in external funding. Such awards could be targeted to protect research continuity, maintain graduate or postdoctoral personnel, preserve essential research activity, or allow faculty to respond to external funding interruptions. This mechanism would respond directly to current faculty concerns about graduate support and internal bridge funding while recognizing the uncertainty surrounding federal research support.

A further modification could add a structured resubmission pathway to the R-Initiative portfolio. Applicants with strong external proposals that receive favorable but nonfunded reviews could request targeted support to address reviewer concerns and resubmit. The K-State Thrust Awards and Texas A&M Grants on the Edge provide useful models for this approach. A Clemson version could require submission of the original external reviews, a response plan, and identification of the intended resubmission opportunity. This would more directly connect internal investment to a defined external funding outcome. [6][7]

H. Recommendations for Promoting New or Modified Initiatives

Promotion of new or modified R-Initiatives should emphasize that internal research funding is a strategic institutional investment rather than simply an additional grant competition. The Division of Research should communicate the purpose of each mechanism in terms of the research development stage it serves and the outcome expected from the investment. Clear descriptions should explain whether an award is intended to generate preliminary data, build an interdisciplinary team, improve a resubmission, protect research continuity, or position a team for a large external opportunity.

Clemson University should consider an annual R-Initiatives Impact Report that communicates funded projects, faculty participation, external proposals, external awards, publications, graduate outcomes, and examples of projects that moved from internal support to external funding. The current portfolio already has substantial outcomes that could be used to demonstrate value to faculty and campus leadership. Publicizing representative success stories would also help faculty understand how internal support can translate into external funding and scholarly impact.

The Division of Research should also provide targeted outreach before each competition. Short faculty information sessions, college-level briefings, examples of successful applications, and direct communication to early career faculty and emerging interdisciplinary teams could increase awareness and participation. Promotion should explicitly include the humanities, arts, social sciences, and disciplines where external funding is less common, because project completion, creative activity, and scholarly outputs are important dimensions of the R-Initiative return on investment.

Finally, each new or modified initiative should have clearly stated success measures and a reporting plan established at launch. Faculty should understand what outcomes are expected and when they will be assessed. Reporting should include both traditional outcomes such as external awards and broader outcomes such as new collaborations, preliminary data, publications, intellectual property, graduate student support, resubmissions, and creation of durable research programs. This approach would make future R-Initiative assessments more rigorous and would allow Clemson University to refine the portfolio based on evidence rather than relying primarily on aggregate award totals.

I. Notes on Scope and Source Interpretation

The participation figure of 438 refers to tenure-track and tenured faculty members reported by the Division of Research as having participated in an awarded R-Initiative project since 2017. Participation was reported in all eight colleges at the following rates: CAFLS 27 percent, CAH 31 percent, CBSHS 53 percent, College of Business 7 percent, College of Education 29 percent, CECAS 44 percent, College of Science 34 percent, and CAAC 42 percent. The March 2026 presentation does not provide a single university-wide denominator for all tenure-track and tenured faculty, so the 438 figure should not be converted into a university-wide participation percentage. The recent funding interruption should be distinguished from permanent program termination. The March 2026 Vice President for Research presentation reports no R-Initiative awards in 2025-26 and none expected in 2026-27. Clemson University public materials continue to describe CU SUCCEEDS and list prior calls and awardees. The recent period is therefore best described as a substantial interruption or suspension of funding.

Sources

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- Clemson University Division of Research. Research Update, Faculty Senate, March 2026. Includes R-Initiative deliverables, participation, award history, and funding interruption information.

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<https://research.ufl.edu/services/srd/research-seed-funds>
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Featured Funding Opportunities.
<https://research.illinois.edu/find-funding/featured-funding-opportunities>
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<https://aim.umd.edu/research/research-seed-award-program>
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- University of Arizona Research. Internal Funding.
<https://research.arizona.edu/development/find-funding/internal-funding>
- Rutgers-New Brunswick. Seed Funding Projects.
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- University of Arkansas Institute for Integrative and Innovative Research. I3R Watershed Grants Program. <https://i3r.uark.edu/>

POLICY COMMITTEE REPORT

Standing Agenda Items:

2522 (Libraries)

The Policy Committee has considered this matter under the charge of general university policy review, faculty professional ethics; the appointment, tenure, and promotion of faculty, and faculty participation in university governance and submits this report for consideration by the Faculty Senate.

Background

Faculty Senator from the Libraries, Amanda McLeod, and representatives from Clemson University Libraries requested Policy Committee address various issues related to unit status, policies governing participation in shared governance, and their representation in the *Faculty Manual*.

Questions of concern include:

- 1) The Library's status as a unit and the effect of the status for their faculty. Is Libraries to be considered an academic unit? Given that Libraries do not offer degree programs, they do not meet the current definition of academic unit.
- 2) Currently the *FM* does not appropriately recognize how the Library is organized, given a different, more complex hierarchy involving divisions, departments and department heads, and chairs, all with slightly different definitions for Libraries than other academic units.
- 3) Special faculty ranks of lecturers have jobs defined as "librarianship"; although student-facing, this role does not involve designing or teaching courses. With the anticipated move to "Teaching Professors," the Library faculty would not meet criteria for inclusion. Given that the role of Lecturer is anticipated to continue, librarians may continue in that role, though the question of promotability from Lecturer role may need to be addressed.
- 4) Librarian might continue as a TLP "special appointment," if the position remains non-tenurable.
- 5) There may be value in aligning the Libraries with comparable campus units, such as centers or institutes that may benefit from association in the *FM*.

After the Special Order, Policy agreed the Libraries should be involved in drafting relevant language for the *Faculty Manual* and that this draft should be available in September 2026 in order to facilitate inclusion in 2027 *Faculty Manual*.

The Policy Committee met with Faculty Senator from the Libraries, Amanda McLeod in May 2026 to discuss specific concerns regarding the Libraries concerns regarding their role in the Faculty Manual.

In addition, the Faculty Senate president met with Dean Cox, Dean of the Libraries to discuss the organizational chart for the libraries and possible changes to the faculty manual to best accommodate the wishes of the library faculty.

Discussion and Findings

Relevant Faculty Manual Policies

III E.1. Academic Units

- a. An academic unit is a self-governing division of an academic college that establishes internal governing documents consistent with university policies, develops and delivers courses of instruction at the undergraduate and/or graduate level, appoints faculty, and whose administrative head reports directly to the Dean of an academic college. The organizational structure of academic units within each college is determined by the Provost and Deans of the colleges, with input from the collegiate faculties. The creation, dissolution, and/or merging of academic units requires approval of the Board of Trustees.

IV C.1. Faculty Designations – Tenured and Tenure Track Faculty

- j. Library Faculty ranks of **General Librarian, Assistant Librarian, Associate Librarian, and Librarian** correspond to the tenured and tenure track faculty ranks of Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor. Provisions of this manual that refer to specific tenured and tenure track faculty ranks apply to the corresponding Library faculty ranks.

VIII J.1. Heads of Academic Units – Overview

- a. The library chair performs the duties as the head of an academic unit and are included in this section; all reference to “head of an academic unit” shall be understood to include the library chair.

VIII The University’s Administrative Structure

Individual Discussion Points

The Policy Committee met with Faculty Senator from the Libraries, Amanda McLeod in May 2026 to discuss specific concerns regarding the Libraries concerns regarding their role in the Faculty Manual. The major points of the discussion were as follows:

- **Academic Unit** - The definition of academic unit and department currently excludes the library. One suggestion was a statement either within section or added additionally to include the libraries as an academic unit.
- **Library Organizational Chart** - Within the Library organizational structure, unit/department heads may supervise, set goals, consult in annual review, and participate in shared governance. We discussed potentially adding language to the faculty manual indicating that “department heads” within libraries are group 3 administrators.
- **Administrative Structure** - There was a discussion about potentially needing a clarification statement about library administration and whether they are in group 1 or group 3.
- **Faculty designations** - There are currently 2 lecturers at libraries. There was a discussion about title changes and when Teaching faculty designation may be changed.
- **Responsibilities of academic unit head** – there was a question as to whether there is any conflict if academic unit head responsibilities described in the FM are not applicable to Head of Libraries. We discussed potentially adding “as applicable” to head of academic unit description.

In addition, the Faculty Senate president met with Dean Cox, Dean of the Libraries to discuss the organizational chart for the libraries and possible changes to the faculty manual to best accommodate the wishes of the library faculty. The major topics discussed included:

- **Organization Chart** - The faculty would like to keep current organizational structure of Library Chair and Department Heads.
- **Evaluation of Faculty** - Evaluations within the library as done based on librarianship, scholarship, and service. The unit heads (“department heads”) evaluated faculty on librarianship, the Library Chair evaluates scholarship and service. There is a desire to include in the faculty manual that librarians are evaluated by librarianship, scholarship, and service.
- **Academic Unit** - The possibility of the Library becoming its own academic unit.
- **Organization Chart** - Workday is now designating all librarians report to the head of the library based on language in the faculty manual. There was a discussion about possibly creating a special section in the faculty manual with the libraries’ organizational structure of department heads and the library chair.
- The potential special section about the libraries would include language stating the specifics about evaluation of faculty and search and screening committees are included in the library by-laws
- **Faculty Designations** - The use of the “Visiting Librarian” designation for temporary librarians.

The Policy Committee discussed the issues. The major points of discussion within the committee were:

- The Library should have a separate section in the faculty manual to address the differences in the evaluation structure of the librarians.
- The Library should become its own academic unit. They currently operate that way and the committee saw little downside.
- We should make sure that all librarian faculty concerns are addressed in the new section and should solicit additional feedback from the Senators representing the Libraries.

Recommendations

The Policy Committee has the following recommendations:

- Add language specifying that the Libraries are an academic unit.
- Add a section in the FM to outline the administrative structure of the libraries and clarifying the role of the Library Chair as distinct from an academic unit head.
- Include language indicating that specifics about evaluations, search and screening are in the library's by-laws.
- Include language in the FM that evaluation of librarians is done based on librarianship, scholarship, and service.
- Add language specifying library "associate deans" are Group 2 administrators and library "department heads" are Group 3 administrators.



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Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Higher Education

Report 1:

Dominant state and national forces shaping the future of higher education, and their influence on public confidence and expectations for higher education

September 2026

Committee Members:

Sarah A. White (Chair), Carlos Cabrera, Elizabeth Cieniewicz, Eliza Gallagher, Mark Johnson, Matt Nicolette, Jill Shelnut, Paige Thomsen

Executive Summary

Higher education is facing multiple structural pressures at once. Demographic change, financial constraints, shifting federal policy, artificial intelligence, new educational competitors, declining public confidence, and changing expectations for student outcomes are making the traditional university operating model less predictable.

The central financial issue is increasingly how resources are allocated. In South Carolina, real state support per student increased substantially over the past decade while net tuition revenue remained relatively flat. Among the 12 public four-year institutions examined, total real expenditures per student rose by only about 4%, while instructional and academic-support spending declined and research and institutional-support spending increased.

University staffing has shifted toward more specialized professional roles. Traditional office and administrative-support staffing declined, while management, business/financial operations, and student/academic-affairs staffing increased. The key question is not simply whether administration has grown, but whether growth is proportional to institutional needs and demonstrably supports the academic mission.

Federal policy is creating greater uncertainty for research and student financing. Research priorities are becoming more targeted, while scrutiny of indirect costs, research security, and international collaborations has increased. At the same time, new federal limits on graduate, professional, and Parent PLUS borrowing place greater pressure on institutions to understand program costs, pricing, and long-term financial sustainability.

Competition for students is expanding beyond traditional colleges and universities. Community colleges, online providers, microcredentials, industry certifications, apprenticeships, and employer-based education are expanding the ways students can obtain skills and credentials. These alternatives may not replace the bachelor's degree, but they weaken its position as the default pathway to employment.

Demographic change will intensify enrollment competition. Declining numbers of traditional college-age students, uncertain yield, summer melt, tuition discounting, retention, and the in-state/out-of-state enrollment mix will make enrollment management increasingly important to institutional financial health.

Artificial intelligence is changing learning and the nature of academic work. AI is reshaping assessment, academic integrity, faculty workload, and workforce expectations. Its educational value will depend less on the technology itself than on how institutions preserve human judgment, rigorous learning, and meaningful evidence of what students know and can do.

Public trust, faculty and staff morale, and institutional transparency are strategic concerns. Confidence in higher education has declined, while concerns about compensation, workload, academic freedom, shared governance, and leadership affect the

ability to recruit and retain talented employees. Transparent communication and credible opportunities for input will be especially important as institutions make difficult decisions.

Faculty and staff morale are important components of institutional resilience.

Compensation, workload, academic freedom, professional autonomy, shared governance, recognition, leadership, and transparency all influence recruitment and retention. Universities compete for faculty talent through an entire professional environment, not salary alone. Institutions that fail to provide competitive compensation, meaningful academic freedom, reasonable workloads, and credible opportunities for employee voice may weaken their ability to attract and retain the people necessary to sustain teaching and research.

Trust and transparency will be especially important as institutions make difficult decisions. Budget reductions, program prioritization, reorganizations, staffing changes, and shifts in strategic priorities may be unavoidable. Employees are more likely to accept difficult outcomes when they understand the problem being addressed, the evidence considered, the criteria used, the alternatives evaluated, and the tradeoffs involved. Transparency does not require consensus, but it does require making the logic of important institutional decisions visible.

Administration and faculty should not be viewed as competing components of the university. Both are essential to accomplishing the academic mission. The appropriate question is whether administrative structures enable teaching, research, student learning, academic freedom, and public service, and whether resources devoted to those structures are proportional to the activities they support. Administrative effectiveness should therefore be evaluated through mission alignment and measurable outcomes rather than broad labels such as “administrative bloat.”

The central strategic challenge is adaptation without loss of mission. Public universities will need to become more flexible, accountable, transparent, and responsive while preserving the qualities that distinguish universities from other educational providers: rigorous inquiry, expert faculty judgment, academic freedom, sustained intellectual development, research, mentorship, and public service. Institutional success may depend less on continued growth than on the ability to identify core priorities, allocate resources deliberately, support faculty and staff, develop multiple pathways for learners, and clearly demonstrate the distinctive value the university produces.

1. The Funding Landscape

Costs associated with University Operation. Costs of running a university go well beyond personnel (though that is a large portion of most university recurring budgets). Costs are typically related to education and related (E&G at Clemson) expenditures include instruction, student services, central academic and administrative support, operations, and maintenance. Costs can also be associated with research, public service, and auxiliary enterprises (housing, food, athletics). Nationally from 2022-23, nearly 43% of the total cost of educating both undergraduate and graduate students at public doctoral institutions is not covered by net tuition revenue, but rather subsidized by other sources.¹

Shifts in funding sources. Tuition-based revenues are one major source of funding for many institutions across the US. On average, state and local funding per student at the national level was \$11,680 in 2023-24 and \$12,082 in 2024-25.^{1,2} Funding from the state of SC averaged \$8,770 per student in 2024-25. At the national level from 2022-23, funding per student at public doctoral institutions included:¹

- investment income (5.6%)
- private gifts (5.6%)
- federal appropriations and federal, state, and local grants and contracts (29.7%)
- state and local appropriations (25.6%) – specific to SC in 2024-25²
 - 27% is non-tax (lottery-funded financial aid)
 - 5% local
 - 68% tax appropriations
- net tuition revenue (33.5%).

An additional source of state and local higher education funding for two and four-year public institutions involves special-purpose appropriations for research, agricultural extension programs, public health care services, and medical education (RAM). Nationally, RAM comprised 9.8% of public institution budgets in 2025.² In South Carolina, 11.7% of state and local higher education funding was from Research, Agriculture, and Medical RAM in 2025.²

Between 2012-13 and 2022-23, net tuition revenues per student were similar in \$ value (\$13,300 and \$13,200, respectively), but the relative percentage of institutional revenue sources from net tuition revenue declined 3.9% over that 10-year period, as other sources of funding became more important. The State Higher Education Finance (SHEF) Report indicated public institutions received 3.5% less net tuition and fee revenue per FTE in 2024-25.² While there is a national trend of declining enrollment (-3%) from 2019 to 2023, the state of SC had a 4% increase in undergraduate enrollment.¹ These slight trends downward in federal and state revenue sources, coupled with increasing (FY 25: 3.6%, FY 24: 3.4%, FY 23: 4.0%) Commonfund Higher Education Price Index³, compound the need for increasing fiscal restraint as evinced by institutional actions across the US to reduce personnel costs, prioritize academic programs, close programs, and more.

¹ https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-in-College-Pricing-and-Student-Aid-2025-final_1.pdf

² <https://shef.sheeo.org/report/>

³ <https://www.commonfund.org/higher-education-price-index>

State investment in public universities. While the national trend in state investment per student FTE at public higher education institutions declined by 1% from 2024 to 2025, funding actually increased by 28.2% (inflation-adjusted) since 2015.⁴ In fact, for South Carolina, funding/FTE from 2015-2025 increased 50.8% (Table 1).⁴ This shift is telling in that rising costs have not solely been transferred to students (as increased tuition). Other sources of funding are offsetting the nominal tuition revenues received per FTE.

Table 1. Dollars appropriated by the state of South Carolina for public institutions of higher education. Values presented are nominal and HECA (Higher Education Cost Adjusted, excluding cost of living by state) per FTE. Contrast shown among SC appropriations per full-time equivalent (FTE), net tuition, and the student share of education costs covered by tuition revenues.⁴

FY	SC education appropriations/FTE (nominal)	SC appropriations/FTE (2025 HECA \$)	Net tuition revenue/FTE (nominal)	Net tuition revenue / (2025 HECA \$)	Student share
2015	\$4,704	\$6,280	\$8,262	\$11,030	66.6%
2016	\$5,104	\$6,699	\$8,760	\$11,498	65.9%
2017	\$5,571	\$7,153	\$9,341	\$11,995	65.2%
2018	\$5,675	\$7,120	\$10,776	\$13,518	69.2%
2019	\$5,725	\$7,022	\$10,156	\$12,457	67.7%
2020	\$6,301	\$7,589	\$10,134	\$12,205	63.7%
2021	\$7,376	\$8,644	\$10,349	\$12,128	60.4%
2022	\$6,852	\$7,637	\$10,436	\$11,631	62.5%
2023	\$7,290	\$7,796	\$10,511	\$11,240	61.2%
2024	\$8,773	\$9,054	\$10,497	\$10,833	56.2%
2025	\$9,471	\$9,471	\$11,579	\$11,579	56.8%

How do these shifts in funding with increased state appropriations over the last decade track with the increasing costs of operating institutions of higher education? Operating costs include instruction, academic support, student services, institutional support/administration, operations and maintenance, and research.⁵ Table 2 presents average national operation costs (spending benchmark) per student FTE at a public 4-year institution, contrasted with those per student in SC. These data suggest that recurring educational revenue grew faster in SC (20%) than national public spending per FTE (4%). However, this trend does not mean that SC institutions have a 16% surplus, we need to look at changes in spending by category. Real instructional spending per student nationally fell by nearly 8%, reflecting the trend that rising university budgets do not necessarily translate into increased classroom investments. Academic support and student services also declined marginally ~3% total).

⁴ <https://shef.sheeo.org/report-2/#education-appropriations>

⁵ <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/viewtable?returnUrl=%2Fsearch&tableId=25093&utm>

Table 2. South Carolina state support and tuition costs per student FTE in 2015 and 2021 contrasted with national operational costs for US public 4-year institutions.^{4,5}

Per-FTE measure, 2025 HECA dollars [†]	2015	2021	Real change
SC state education appropriations	\$6,280	\$8,644	+37.6%
SC net tuition revenue	\$11,030	\$12,128	+10.0%
SC state support + net tuition	\$17,310	\$20,772	+20.0%
U.S. public 4-year:			
Instruction	~\$15,070	~\$13,880	-7.9%
Research	~\$6,970	~\$7,140	+2.5%
Academic support	~\$4,320	~\$4,260	-1.3%
Student services	~\$2,500	~\$2,460	-1.8%
Institutional support/administration	~\$4,480	~\$4,510	+0.6%
U.S. public 4-year: Total expenses	~\$51,460	~\$53,560	+4.1%

[†]Given limitations in IPEDS data by year, data presented contrast costs/FTE by operational costs for 2015 and 2021, adjusted to 2025 HECA (Higher Education Cost Adjusted, excluding cost of living by state) adjusted dollars.

Nationally, institutional support or administrative costs increased by only 0.6%, which is somewhat at odds with the narrative that, nationally, administrative costs are driving increased operating costs. Rather, other operating costs, which could include public service, scholarships and fellowships, auxiliary enterprises (housing / athletics), depreciation and other expenses, drove real expenditures per student to increase by 4%. We drilled down into 12 SC public higher education institutions and evaluated trends in funding and operational costs from 2014-2024 (Table 3). State appropriations grew over the last 10 years in South Carolina. State education appropriations per student FTE increased from \$6,280 to \$9,054 (+44%), while net tuition revenue per student FTE declined slightly (-1.8%). Growth in combined educational revenue (state appropriation + tuition) was driven primarily by increased public funding.

Expenses related to instruction decreased by 6% even as educational revenues increased. Research and institutional support were the two clearest growth areas. Research spending increased by ~15%, while institutional support increased by ~18%. Institutional support was stable for much of the decade, until most of the growth occurred in 2023 and 2024. Academic support also declined (-6.5%), while student-services spending was essentially unchanged.

Likely one of the most important trends we can derive from these data is that total expenses per student FTE rose only about 4% from 2015 to 2024. This means that *how* revenues were spent changed, reflecting a shift in how expenses are prioritized within SC public universities' operating cost structures.

From 2015 to 2024, student FTEs for the 12 SC institutions increased 11%, from nearly 103,000 to 114,400. During the same time, total employee/staff FTEs increased by ~13%.

However, changes in employees/staff differed by employment category. Employee FTEs were normalized per 1,000 student FTEs to enable simpler contrasts with revenue per student FTE and operational costs per student FTE (Table 3). Instructional staff FTEs increased by 4.4% in response to increased student enrollment.

In a pattern consistent with universities at large becoming more reliant on specialized professionals in areas such as finance, compliance, HR, analytics, procurement, grants, risk management, communications, student support, and similar functions, traditional clerical staffing declined sharply (-29.3%) while higher-level professional and managerial occupations increased [management (+14.5%), professional business/financial staff (+40.8%), and student/academic-affairs professional FTEs (+37.6%)].

The rise in institutional support costs likely corresponds with growth in specialized managerial and professional administrative staffing, such as in student/academic affairs, where increasing FTEs likely include professional personnel hired for roles such as: advising, student affairs, academic support, admissions-related activities, and other education services. Student-services expenditures per FTE was essentially flat (+0.1%) in real dollars, even while student/academic affairs FTEs increased suggesting shifting occupational classifications, relatively lower compensation / position, reductions in non-personnel student-service expenses, activities accounted for under different finance functions, or staffing growth concentrated in areas not mapped one-for-one onto the IPEDS Student Services finance category.⁶

Research employee FTE increased by 15% to 5.2 FTE per 1,000 students, indicating a broader shift in the public four-year system toward a greater focus on research. Of note, if we combine management FTEs with business/financial operations FTEs and create a “professional administration” category, professional FTEs have increased by 23% (from 26 to 32 FTEs/1,000 students), while instructional FTEs have increased by only 4%. Professional administrative FTEs grew 5x faster at SC public universities than did instructional FTEs per 1,000 students. These data do not suggest that additional administrative FTEs were unnecessary, but do raise questions about (1) the functions FTEs perform, (2) why professional administration areas increased so quickly in contrast with instructional FTEs, and (3) what measurable value resulted from that growth?

Nationally, over the same period of growth in professional administration FTEs, inflation-adjusted faculty salaries have declined by 9.5% from fall 2019 levels.⁷ Administrator salaries are much greater than faculty salaries. Median presidential pay (\$648,481) at public institutions increased 44% from 2012-2022, while median faculty pay (\$106,664) increased only 22% over the same period.⁸ In 2012, the median president's salary was 5:1 to the median faculty salary; in 2022, the ratio was 6:1. At Clemson University, in 2022 the ratio president: faculty salary was 9:1.⁸ From 2012-22, presidential pay increased 136% (\$943,331), while median faculty pay (\$103,923) increased only 14% over the same time period.⁸

⁶ <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/CDSPreview.aspx?sid=14d9770f-3447-461b-a76b-867376c6e9f3&rtid=5>

⁷ https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/ARES_2025-26.pdf , Figure 1 p 3

⁸ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/your-college-president-makes-six-times-as-much-as-you>

Table 3. Educational revenue (state appropriations + tuition) contrasted with operational costs (expense categories) for 12[†] South Carolina public institutions of higher education, per student FTE, and employee FTE per 1,000 student FTE by HR category/employment type from 2015 through 2024.^{4,5}

FY	REVENUE ⁴ — \$ per FTE			EXPENDITURES ⁶ — \$ per FTE							STAFFING — FTE per 1,000 student FTE				
	State approp.	Net tuition	State + tuition	Instruction	Research	Public service	Academic support	Student services	Institutional support	Total expenses	Instructional	Management	Business / finance	Student / academic affairs	Office / admin support
2015	\$6,280	\$11,030	\$17,310	\$13,571	\$4,392	\$2,213	\$3,114	\$3,059	\$3,229	\$36,968	55.5	17.8	8.3	8.8	28.2
2016	\$6,699	\$11,498	\$18,196	\$13,794	\$4,297	\$2,172	\$2,904	\$2,914	\$3,296	\$37,175	58.1	16.3	8.5	9.9	27.5
2017	\$7,153	\$11,995	\$19,148	\$14,181	\$4,417	\$2,141	\$2,888	\$3,070	\$3,342	\$38,043	58.8	16.8	9.4	9.9	25.3
2018	\$7,120	\$13,518	\$20,638	\$13,796	\$4,240	\$2,137	\$2,866	\$3,019	\$3,388	\$38,237	57.5	17.0	9.2	9.9	24.3
2019	\$7,022	\$12,457	\$19,478	\$13,501	\$4,537	\$1,982	\$2,946	\$2,981	\$3,084	\$38,996	58.4	18.6	9.4	9.9	24.9
2020	\$7,589	\$12,205	\$19,794	\$13,258	\$4,367	\$2,099	\$3,177	\$2,894	\$3,256	\$39,731	56.6	17.9	8.9	8.8	22.7
2021	\$8,644	\$12,128	\$20,772	\$12,377	\$4,287	\$2,243	\$2,927	\$2,798	\$3,151	\$38,674	57.3	18.4	8.9	8.5	21.3
2022	\$7,637	\$11,631	\$19,268	\$12,534	\$4,467	\$2,128	\$3,228	\$2,878	\$3,231	\$39,255	58.4	19.1	9.8	8.9	20.0
2023	\$7,796	\$11,240	\$19,035	\$12,726	\$4,659	\$2,174	\$2,972	\$2,853	\$3,654	\$38,052	58.9	19.5	11.0	11.7	19.6
2024	\$9,054	\$10,833	\$19,888	\$12,729	\$5,057	\$2,328	\$2,911	\$3,062	\$3,823	\$38,478	58.0	20.3	11.7	12.1	19.9
2015-24 change	+44.2%	−1.8%	+14.9%	−6.2%	+15.1%	+5.2%	−6.5%	+0.1%	+18.4%	+4.1%	+4.4%	+14.5%	+40.8%	+37.6%	−29.3%

[‡]Clemson University, Coastal Carolina University, College of Charleston, The Citadel, Francis Marion University, Lander University, South Carolina State University, University of South Carolina—Columbia, USC Aiken, USC Beaufort, USC Upstate, Winthrop University

[†] Educational revenues are not equivalent to total university revenue, so total expenses will not sum to total expenses

Federal Funding Alignment and Prioritization Shifts

Federal research priorities and policies have changed, altering faculty research focal areas and dramatically redistributing research funding to new priority areas.

In FY27, White House research priorities focus on AI, quantum information science, biotechnology, energy, national security, and space, with particular emphasis on the physical and biological sciences, engineering, and technologies tied to U.S. competitiveness and security.⁹ This administration is focusing on technological leadership, economic competitiveness, national security, domestic industrial capacity, and measurable scientific outcomes.

On average, support for higher education from federal agencies declined by \$1.7B (4%) in 2025 compared with 2024. Notable declines in funding availability: \$1.1B (Dept of Energy), \$236M (Health & Human Services), \$166M (Agriculture), \$141M (NSF), \$94M (Commerce), Transportation (\$27M), and more. Only two agencies had increases in funding distributed: the Department of Defense (+\$205M) and NASA (\$9M).¹⁰ Agencies are also more willing to terminate or redirect awards based on changing research priorities.¹¹⁻¹² Of particular focus for termination were grants that involved DEI, environmental justice, and misinformation/disinformation.

This is a substantial change from a strategic standpoint, as historic grant awards were multi-year and would not be terminated or redirected save for performance or compliance issues. Current policies call for greater diversification of institutional funding portfolios, increased industry and foundation funding, reduced reliance on single federal research themes, and focused monitoring of agency research priorities to ensure stable research funding.

Potential changes to the indirect-cost reimbursement policies are of particular concern, as changes to negotiated indirect-cost rates will directly impact university research enterprise and cost economics. The proposed rate for both NIH and NSF was a standard 15%.¹³⁻¹⁴ Both suggested rates were blocked in court cases. Congress included statutory language restricting NIH from implementing a substantially different indirect-cost approach.¹⁵

International research collaborations face greater scrutiny and administrative separation than in previous years. Awards to collaborating foreign institutions, previously subawards, are now separate, trackable, linked awards or subprojects, with funding to foreign universities directly identifiable and administered separately.¹⁶ These changes increased

⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/M-25-34-NSTM-2-Fiscal-Year-FY-2027-Administration-Research-and-Development-Budget-Priorities-and-Cross-Cutting-Actions.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-academic-years-main-stories-told-through-data>

¹¹ <https://www.nsf.gov/updates-on-priorities>

¹² <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-26-009.html>

¹³ <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-25-068.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.nsf.gov/policies/document/indirect-cost-rate>

¹⁵ <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48540>

¹⁶ <https://www.grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-25-104.html>

documentation requirements, research security oversight, administrative complexity, and the need for closer tracking of foreign collaborations and funding.

Student loan access

Changes in student loan access for *graduate and professional loans* occurred July 1, 2026.¹⁷ Grad PLUS has been eliminated. New graduate and professional borrowing caps apply with annual federal loan limits for graduate students of \$20,500/year with a max of \$100,000. Professional students have a maximum annual federal loan limit of \$50,000/year, with a maximum aggregate limit of \$200,000. Classifications for professional programs were also changed, but an ongoing court stay resulted in a list of 29 professional degree programs considered “Professional” while 25 programs were still excluded.¹⁸

Parent PLUS loans were capped at \$20,000 per dependent student with an aggregate maximum of \$65,000 per dependent student.¹⁹ Universities can now set lower program-specific federal loan limits, if the limits are applied consistently to all students within the program.²⁰ Federal financing is increasingly correlated with program cost, expected outcomes, and repayment risk, thus universities may decide that students with modest expected earnings should not borrow the maximum federal amount permitted to mitigate repayment risk.

Research and student-financing policy commonalities

Federal policies are becoming more targeted and focused on ensuring federal dollars spent are directly connected to stated national priorities. This impacts both research funding and student loan funding (Table 4), straining both sides of the traditional university funding model.

Table 4. Alignment of federal policies on research and student financing.

Research policy	Student-finance policy
More scrutiny of indirect costs	Limits on graduate borrowing
More emphasis on measurable/direct research	More emphasis on program price/value
Strategic prioritization of research areas	Greater differentiation among program types
Increased federal oversight/accountability	Institutional ability to limit borrowing
Reduced willingness to fund activities viewed as peripheral to federal priorities	Reduced willingness to finance unlimited cost of attendance

On the research side, institutions may have less certainty about the level of federal reimbursement available to support the infrastructure behind research. On the education

¹⁷ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/05/01/2026-08556/reimagining-and-improving-student-education-federal-student-loan-program-final-regulations>

¹⁸ <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/electronic-announcements/2026-06-29/update-list-professional-degree-programs-due-court-order-updated-july-10-2026>

¹⁹ <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/fact-sheet-trump-administration-making-college-more-affordable>

²⁰ https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2026-06-26/implementing-new-institutional-authority-set-program-level-federal-student-loan-limits?utm_source=chatgpt.com

side, graduate and professional programs may have less ability to rely on effectively unlimited federal student borrowing to support high tuition. The underlying strategic assumptions of higher-education funding as related to both research (indirect cost recovery and research priorities) and federal loans (new borrowing caps, market tuition cap changes) are being strained concurrently. Taken together, these developments could make the next decade much more focused on the underlying economics of individual research and academic programs, rather than simply on university capacity to secure grants or enroll students.

Postsecondary Education Market Competition

The postsecondary education market is becoming increasingly diverse and modular, creating new forms of competition for traditional four-year public institutions (Table 5). Short-term certificates,²¹ associate degrees, industry certifications, microcredentials,²² apprenticeships, employer-based training,²³ and online programs are giving students more ways to gain job-relevant skills without beginning with a traditional four-year degree.

Table 5. Alternative postsecondary pathways and competitive pressure on four-year public universities.

Pathway	Time	Relative cost	Primary value proposition	Competitive threat to 4-year publics
Traditional bachelor's	4 y	High	Broad education + credential + experience	Baseline
Community college + transfer	4 y total	Lower	Lower-cost bachelor's pathway	High if transfer is seamless
Associate degree	~2 y	Low/moderate	Rapid workforce entry	High in middle-skill fields
Industry certificate	Months -1 y	Low	Specific job skill	High in technology/business fields
Microcredential	Weeks—months	Low	Skill validation/upskilling	More complement than replacement
Apprenticeship	1–5 y	Often paid	Work + credential	High in selected occupations
Employer training	Variable	Often employer-funded	Direct workplace advancement	High for adult learners
Online degree provider	2–4 y	Variable	Convenience/flexibility	High for working adults

Alternative pathways are particularly attractive in fields where competencies are clearly defined and directly linked to employment, such as information technology, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, allied health, data analytics, and some business occupations. Community and technical colleges are also strengthening their role through lower-cost programs, workforce partnerships, and transfer pathways. Employers are increasingly participating directly in the credentialing ecosystem and experimenting with skills-based hiring, weakening the bachelor's degree's exclusive role as a signal of job readiness in

²¹ <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/bridging-middle-skills-gap/>

²² <https://credentialengine.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Counting-Credentials-in-Context-2025-Report.pdf>

²³ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6197797102be715f55c0e0a1/t/65cc355c4935cb001349a4cd/1707881822922/Skills-Based+Hiring+02122024+vF.pdf>

some fields.²²⁻²³ However, evidence suggests that changes in actual hiring practices are occurring more slowly than changes in job-posting requirements.

Rather than replacing the bachelor's degree entirely, these developments are changing how postsecondary education is accumulated over a lifetime. National Student Clearinghouse data show increasing numbers of learners are earning credentials sequentially (credential stacking), returning to education after completing an earlier certificate or degree, and building toward higher credentials over time.²⁴ Nearly 892,300 students earning an undergraduate credential in 2024–25 already held a prior postsecondary award, illustrating the growth of more flexible and nonlinear educational pathways. Federal policy may accelerate this trend: beginning July 1, 2026, the new Workforce Pell Grant program allows eligible students to use federal Pell funding for certain high-quality short-term workforce programs, including programs as short as eight weeks.²⁵ Alternative credentials increase competition for traditional degree programs, particularly where learners prioritize speed, affordability, flexibility, and direct labor-market relevance. Nevertheless, bachelor's degrees continue to provide substantial economic value overall; Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reports that prime-age bachelor's degree holders earn substantially more and experience lower unemployment than workers with only a high-school diploma.²¹ The competitive challenge for four-year institutions is therefore increasingly to demonstrate both the near-term workforce value and the longer-term adaptability provided by a bachelor's education.

For four-year public institutions, the principal strategic threat is not that alternative credentials will eliminate demand for bachelor's degrees, but that universities may lose their position as the default gateway to postsecondary education and employment. Institutions that remain dependent on a single model (high school graduate to four-year residential degree) could increasingly compete for a narrower share of learners. Competitive pressure will be greatest in programs where students can obtain similar employment outcomes faster and at substantially lower cost elsewhere, as well as in graduate and professional education serving working adults. Public universities may therefore need to make their programs more flexible, stackable, transferable, employer-connected, and responsive to lifelong learning while preserving the broader educational and developmental benefits that distinguish a bachelor's degree from shorter-term training.

2. Artificial Intelligence

Evidence base and search strategy

This section presents a systematic-review-informed ecological scan rather than a completed formal systematic review. The search addressed four questions: how artificial intelligence is affecting learning, assessment, academic integrity, and AI literacy; how it is affecting faculty work and governance; what research and reports say about microcredentials, AI certifications, recognition, and workforce pathways; and how AI bears

²⁴ <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/data-dive-degree-earners-are-building-on-prior-credentials/>

²⁵ <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-issues-final-rule-create-new-workforce-pell-grant-program>

on institutional purpose, equity, and public response. Sources were screened for relevance, provenance, transparency of methods or evidence base, limitations, and transferability.²⁶⁻²⁷ The recency of AI naturally results in limitations, including short observation windows and a lack of longitudinal data. In addition, many of the source documents rely on nonprobability surveys, self-reports, and non-U.S. contexts. There is also limited current evidence on labor market returns for AI credentials in the US context.

Scope and framing

The evidence describes an educational and institutional ecology: AI tools alter how students obtain information, how faculty design learning, how institutions govern risk, and how employers interpret credentials. Structured and reflective use may amplify learning and human judgment; unguided reliance may substitute generated outputs for the cognitive and social work that education is meant to develop. This framing does not establish that AI will improve or damage learning in every setting. It identifies the conditions that require attention in considering AI use: task design, interactions, feedback, duration, disciplinary context, learner preparation, and accountability.

Learning, assessment, and the role of faculty

A 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis identified 69 experimental articles and meta-analyzed 62 studies addressing the use of ChatGPT in education.²⁸ It reported positive findings for academic performance, affective-motivational outcomes, and higher-order thinking propensities in some conditions, but also reported reduced mental effort in some analyses and no significant effect on self-efficacy. The authors caution that the literature remains vulnerable to uneven power analysis, post-intervention measurement, novelty effects, and the absence of objective and long-term outcomes. These findings support neither a claim that ChatGPT reliably improves learning nor a claim that it undermines learning.

A second recent review focused specifically on higher-order cognitive skills among university students and found positive, mixed, conditional, and negative findings across 89 studies.²⁹ Its most defensible contribution is conceptual: AI may function as both an *amplifier* when use is structured, dialogic, and reflective, and a *substitute* when students outsource analysis, evaluation, or problem-solving without sufficient verification or explanation. A separate review of over-reliance on AI dialogue systems similarly identifies cognitive offloading as a risk requiring investigation, not as an inevitable outcome.³⁰ The evidence, therefore, points toward designing conditions for independent reasoning and

²⁶ Office of Educational Technology. 2023. Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning: Insights and Recommendations. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/ai-report/ai-report.pdf>

²⁷ Alubthane, F. O. 2026. Amplifier or Substitute? A Systematic Review of Generative AI's Impact on Higher-Order Cognitive Skills among University Students. *Frontiers in Psychology* 17: 1863931. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1863931>

²⁸ Deng, R., M. Jiang, X. Yu, Y. Lu, and S. Liu. 2025. Does ChatGPT Enhance Student Learning? A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Experimental Studies. *Computers & Education* 227: 105224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2024.105224>

²⁹ Alubthane, F. O. 2026. Amplifier or Substitute? A Systematic Review of Generative AI's Impact on Higher-Order Cognitive Skills among University Students. *Frontiers in Psychology* 17: 1863931. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1863931>

³⁰ Zhai, C., S. Wibowo, and L. D. Li. 2024. The Effects of Over-reliance on AI Dialogue Systems on Students' Cognitive Abilities: A Systematic Review. *Smart Learning Environments* 11: 28. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-024-00316-7>

accountable collaboration, not toward trying to define learning outcomes that AI can never touch.

A systematic review of generative AI and educational assessment found that approaches focused on detecting AI use are problematic and error-prone.³¹ The review posits that assessment must attend more closely to the evidence of learning: process, revision, reasoning, feedback, oral explanation, situated performance, and transparent conditions of tool use, rather than primarily or solely evaluating an outcome. It also requires distinguishing assessment validity from academic integrity. A prohibited use of AI may be an integrity violation, but a permitted use of AI may still produce only weak evidence of what a student knows or can do.³²

AI literacy is relevant to both students and faculty, but it is not yet a settled measurable outcome. A COSMIN-based review examined 22 studies and 16 AI-literacy scales. Structural validity and internal consistency were generally stronger than evidence for content validity, construct validity, responsiveness, cross-cultural validity, or measurement error; most instruments relied on self-report rather than being performance-based.³³ This review suggests that universities should define AI literacy in relation to disciplinary purposes, judgment, limitations, ethics, and verification rather than assuming that a single general-purpose test captures it.

These findings support a shift in what professorial work makes visible. Faculty judgment remains necessary to identify worthwhile questions, sequence learning, interpret disciplinary standards, provide feedback, mentor students, evaluate evidence, and maintain accountability for educational decisions. The U.S. Department of Education's guidance frames AI as a tool that should augment rather than displace educators and emphasizes human oversight, equity, privacy, and the professional role of teachers.³² The AAUP likewise identifies assessment redesign, policy interpretation, intellectual property, academic freedom, workload, and meaningful participation as governance issues.³⁴ The question is not whether a tool can generate an answer; it is who decides what counts as a worthwhile question, a defensible answer, and demonstrated learning.

Faculty work and institutional governance

AI adoption is an organizational and shared-governance problem as much as a classroom problem.³⁴ Faculty perspectives identify possible efficiencies alongside new work: revising assignments, explaining permitted uses, checking outputs, responding to student uncertainty, and addressing academic-integrity concerns. Whether AI reduces or intensifies workload depends on institutional policy, technical support, training, procurement, privacy protections, and whether faculty have meaningful influence over

³¹ Zhao, J., E. Chapman, and P. G. P. Sabet. 2024. Generative AI and Educational Assessments: A Systematic Review. *Education Research and Perspectives* 51: 124-155. <https://doi.org/10.70953/ERPv51.2412006>

³² Office of Educational Technology. 2023. Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning: Insights and Recommendations. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/ai-report/ai-report.pdf>

³³ Lintner, T. 2024. A Systematic Review of AI Literacy Scales. *npj Science of Learning* 9: 50. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41539-024-00264-4>

³⁴ American Association of University Professors. 2025. Artificial Intelligence and Academic Professions. <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/topical-reports/artificial-intelligence-and-academic>

implementation. A 2025 systematic review of educator trust in generative AI in higher education settings similarly finds that trust depends on individual factors, institutional strategies, leadership support, professional development, and socio-ethical conditions.³⁵

The AI governance literature is becoming more developed, but it remains more descriptive and normative than causal. A comparative analysis of 80 academic guidelines shows that institutions are addressing both opportunities for access and collaboration and risks involving misinformation, integrity, and responsible use.³⁶ The guidelines do not establish that any particular policy improves learning or trust; however, they do show that governance questions are no longer hypothetical. Faculty and institutions must decide how to handle privacy, intellectual property, academic freedom, bias, accessibility, procurement, student disclosure, and the right to meaningful human support.

Sector survey evidence adds to the current context. The Tyton Partners 2024 report surveyed students, instructors, and administrators and describes rising GenAI adoption, simultaneous workload effects, incomplete institutional policies, limited training, and unequal access to digital infrastructure.³⁷ The Tyton Partners Report is self-reported sector evidence, so it can characterize perceptions and conditions but should not be taken as establishing causal effects on workload, learning, or equity.

Microcredentials, AI certifications, and workforce signaling

The microcredential literature identifies potential benefits in flexible learning, recognition of specific capabilities, and transitions between education and employment.³⁸ It also repeatedly identifies unresolved conditions: clear learning outcomes, valid assessment, quality assurance, portability, employer recognition, data governance, and integration with further education or broader credentials. A systematic review of 56 peer-reviewed articles emphasizes implementation, stakeholder coordination, institutional capacity, and recognition; a separate readiness study shifts attention from issuing badges to policy, infrastructure, expertise, and organizational coordination.³⁹⁻⁴⁰

The evidence for AI-specific certification is especially limited. A Georgetown analysis of job postings from 2010 through 2020 found that explicit demand for AI certifications was limited and that certifications generally complemented, rather than replaced, degrees and

³⁵ Lelescu, A., S. Sava, G. Grosseck, et al. 2025. Exploring Trust in Generative AI for Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Literature Review Focused on Educators. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12: 1961. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06253-1>

³⁶ Jiao, J., S. Afroogh, K. Chen, D. Atkinson, and A. Dhurandhar. 2025. The Global Landscape of Academic Guidelines for Generative AI and LLMs. *Nature Human Behaviour* 9: 638-642. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02124-6>

³⁷ Tyton Partners. 2024. Time for Class 2024: Unlocking Access to Effective Digital Teaching and Learning. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Time-for-Class-2024.pdf>

³⁸ OECD. 2021. Micro-credential Innovations in Higher Education: Who, What and Why? *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, no. 39. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f14ef041-en>

³⁹ Ahsan, K., S. Akbar, B. Kam, and M. D.-A. Abdulrahman. 2023. Implementation of Micro-credentials in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review. *Education and Information Technologies* 28: 13505-13540. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11739-z>

⁴⁰ Varadarajan, S., J. H. L. Koh, and B. K. Daniel. 2025. Institutional Readiness for the Implementation of Micro-credentials in Higher Education. *Distance Education* 46 (1): 36-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2024.2442017>

prior experience.⁴¹ Notably, this work was completed prior to the emergence of generative AI in 2022 so it serves as a useful pre-GenAI baseline, not evidence about current demand. A Stanford University working paper reports promising evidence on the labor-market signaling of some nontraditional credentials, but its platform-specific population and working-paper status limit its generalizability.⁴² The responsible conclusion is that certification value depends on what the credential measures, how the assessment is secured, who recognizes it, and how it connects to actual work.

Intergovernmental work reaches a compatible conclusion. Microcredentials may support youth transitions and lifelong learning, but their public value depends on trust, recognition, quality, and governance.⁴³ The National Academies' work on AI and the future of work likewise places education within a broader reorganization of tasks and capabilities.⁴⁴ Universities, therefore, face a design question rather than a binary choice between degrees and certifications: which capabilities should be developed through intensive disciplinary study, which can be demonstrated through shorter assessed experiences, and how should the two pathways connect?

Beyond AI: university purpose and unresolved questions

Across the evidence base, AI raises a question broader than tool adoption: what should a university certify that cannot be reduced to tool proficiency or possession of a credential? Students report widespread AI use alongside uncertainty about institutional rules.⁴⁵ Students also value human feedback, discussion, collaboration, judgment, and accountability alongside AI-enabled convenience.⁴⁶ Current evidence does not resolve whether AI will improve durable learning, reduce or intensify faculty workload, narrow or widen inequities, or create reliable labor-market returns for AI credentials. It does clarify the questions that later reports should investigate: how learning is demonstrated, how faculty judgment is supported, how credentials earn recognition, how unequal access affects differential benefits deriving from AI, and how Clemson's own institutional conditions shape responsible choices for both faculty and students.

⁴¹ Gehlhaus, D., and I. Pancorbo. 2021. U.S. Demand for AI Certifications. Center for Security and Emerging Technology, Georgetown University. <https://doi.org/10.51593/20210001>

⁴² Athey, S., and E. Palikot. 2024. The Value of Non-traditional Credentials in the Labor Market. Stanford Graduate School of Business Working Paper No. 4189. <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/working-papers/value-non-traditional-credentials-labor-market>

⁴³ International Labour Organization and UNICEF. 2025. Microcredentials for Youth and Work. International Labour Organization. <https://doi.org/10.54394/DYBU6154>

⁴⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2025. Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27644>

⁴⁵ Lumina Foundation and Gallup. 2026. AI in Higher Education: Widespread Use, Unclear Rules. https://www.gallup.com/file/analytics/704279/Lumina-Foundation-Gallup-SOHE_AI_Report.pdf

⁴⁶ Jisc. 2025. Student Perceptions of AI 2025. <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/student-perceptions-of-ai-2025>

3. Public Perception of Higher Education

Public perception is becoming an increasingly important part of the future of higher education. Colleges and universities depend on public confidence for enrollment, state and federal funding, research investment, financial aid, institutional autonomy, and the willingness of students and families to make a substantial investment in a degree. Yet the public conversation about higher education can be difficult to interpret. Declining confidence is real, but it does not necessarily mean that Americans have stopped believing in higher education or no longer see value in a college degree.⁴⁷

Confidence in higher education has declined considerably over the past decade. Gallup's 2026 survey found that 38% of Americans had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education, compared with 57% when Gallup first measured it in 2015. Another 37% reported some confidence in 2026, while 25% reported very little or no confidence. Political differences remain significant, with high confidence reported by 50% of Democrats, 39% of independents, and 23% of Republicans.⁴⁸ It is also important not to treat every negative poll about higher education as measuring the same thing. An analysis reported by Inside Higher Ed in 2024 cautioned that polls may ask about confidence in higher education as an institution, whether college is worth its cost, whether a degree is necessary for employment, or whether an individual would recommend college to someone else.⁴⁹ Those are related questions, but they are not interchangeable. A person can be dissatisfied with higher education as a sector and still believe that earning a college degree is valuable for themselves or their children.

The Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education reached a similar conclusion in its 2026 report. The committee identified the rising cost and perceived value of higher education, concerns about admissions, and questions involving free speech, political bias, and self-censorship as immediate factors contributing to distrust. It also identified a broader problem: uncertainty about the fundamental purpose of higher education itself.⁵⁰ Public confidence may therefore depend not only on whether universities perform well, but also on whether the public understands what universities are trying to accomplish and believes that institutional practices are consistent with that mission.

Value of a college education (ROI)

The value of a college education is one of the most visible parts of the public debate. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that 49% of Americans believed a four-year degree was less important for obtaining a well-paying job than it had been 20 years earlier, compared with 32% who believed it had become more important. Cost had a significant

⁴⁷ Blake, J. (2024). "Have Americans Actually Lost Faith in Higher Education?" *Inside Higher Ed*, September 24, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/2024/09/24/report-nuance-needed-analysis-higher-ed-polls>

⁴⁸ Jones, J. M. (2026). "Confidence in U.S. Higher Education Slips Back Slightly." *Gallup*, July 13, 2026.

⁴⁹ Blake, J. (2024). "Have Americans Actually Lost Faith in Higher Education?" *Inside Higher Ed*, September 24, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/2024/09/24/report-nuance-needed-analysis-higher-ed-polls>

⁴⁹ Blake, J. (2024). "Have Americans Actually Lost Faith in Higher Education?" *Inside Higher Ed*, September 24, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/2024/09/24/report-nuance-needed-analysis-higher-ed-polls>

⁵⁰ Adams, J., Gage, B., et al. (2026). *Report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education*. Yale University, April 10, 2026.

influence on these judgments: 47% said a four-year degree was worth the cost only if a student did not have to take out loans, 22% said it was worth the cost even with loans, and 29% said it was not worth the cost.⁵¹ The question of whether college is "worth it" is therefore difficult to separate from what students and families are being asked to pay for it.

More recent polling shows the same tension. A 2026 Gallup-Lumina survey reported by Inside Higher Ed found that 63% of Americans thought four-year colleges were doing a poor job of making education affordable, while only 12% rated them good or excellent on affordability. Yet nearly three-quarters of parents still wanted their children to pursue some form of postsecondary education immediately after high school, and a four-year university was the most commonly preferred pathway.⁵² Americans may therefore be skeptical of the cost of higher education without rejecting its value.

Current students also tend to view their own educational experiences more positively than the broader national discussion might suggest. An Inside Higher Ed Student Voice survey found that 62% of students had somewhat or very high trust in their own institution, while only 11% reported low trust. Cost and affordability were nevertheless the issues students said came up most frequently when they discussed higher education with friends and family, followed by career outcomes and return on investment.⁵³ This suggests an important distinction between students' experiences with their own colleges and their concerns about the larger system. These differences matter because "value" can mean several things. Students and families may focus on employment, earnings, debt, and career mobility, while faculty may emphasize critical thinking, communication, intellectual development, citizenship, and knowledge creation. Public polling suggests that Americans expect higher education to do both. The future challenge may not be choosing between workforce preparation and a broader university education, but demonstrating how the two fit together.

Affordability, Price, and Perception

Affordability deserves separate attention because the perceived price of college can shape decisions before a student ever enrolls. An Inside Higher Ed article reporting on National Center for Education Statistics data found that students who, as high school juniors, believed their families could not afford college enrolled at substantially lower rates after high school than students who did not perceive affordability as a barrier.⁵⁴ Students can therefore begin ruling out higher education before completing a financial aid application or knowing the cost of attending a particular institution. The distinction between sticker price and actual price complicates the problem. Many institutions use a high-tuition, high-aid model in which the published price can be substantially higher than what many students

⁵¹ Fry, R., Braga, D., & Parker, K. (2024). "Is College Worth It?" *Pew Research Center*, May 23, 2024.

⁵² Palmer, K. (2026). "Survey: Majority of Americans Say College Not Affordable." *Inside Higher Ed*, July 22, 2026.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2026/07/22/survey-majority-americans-say-college-not-affordable>

⁵³ Flaherty, C. (2025). "Decoding Student Trust." *Inside Higher Ed*, August 18, 2025.

⁵⁴ Redden, E. (2022). "Perceptions of Affordability." *Inside Higher Ed*, January 11, 2022. Reporting on National Center for Education Statistics data. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/12/study-high-schoolers-perceptions-affordability-matter>

ultimately pay. The Yale Committee on Trust argues that this model may increase access for students receiving substantial aid while simultaneously undermining public confidence because the system is complicated, unpredictable, and difficult for families to understand. The committee notes that many families do not understand how tuition discounting and need-based aid work, even when the actual cost of attendance may be considerably below the published price.⁵⁰

Recent research reported by Inside Higher Ed supports that concern. A 2026 Strada survey found that 68% of college students experienced confusion when trying to determine the actual cost of attendance, and only 32% of students and parents described the financial aid process as straightforward. More strikingly, 76% of respondents who encountered a very confusing financial aid process believed colleges cared more about making money than educating students, compared with 49% among those who encountered a straightforward process.⁵⁵ Price transparency is therefore not only a financial aid issue; it can become a trust issue.

At the same time, higher education cannot treat affordability entirely as a communication problem. The Yale Committee concluded that clearer communication may help, but that the underlying cost of higher education remains a serious concern for many families.⁵⁰ The 2026 Inside Higher Ed survey of chief business officers illustrates the institutional side of that tension: 61% reported increasing institutional financial aid in the previous year, while 19% froze or reduced tuition. Yet only 20% believed their own institution had been very or extremely effective in responding to declining public trust, and only 2% believed higher education as a whole had been that effective.⁵⁶

Trust in Research and Expertise.

Public perception of higher education is also connected to trust in research and expertise. Research universities ask the public to support work that may take years to complete and may not produce an immediate economic return. Pew Research Center reported in 2024 that 76% of Americans had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in scientists to act in the public's best interests. That level of confidence remains relatively high, but it varies considerably by political affiliation.⁵⁷

The communication of scientific impact is one part of the challenge. Only 45% of Americans in the Pew survey described research scientists as good communicators, even though much larger percentages described scientists as intelligent and believed they should participate in discussions about scientific issues.⁵⁷ Universities, therefore, face a problem that is different from simply producing good research. Institutions also need to explain how research is conducted, why findings sometimes change as evidence changes, and how scholarly conclusions are evaluated and challenged. The question "Why should

⁵⁵ Palmer, K. (2026). "Confusing College Pricing Sows Mistrust in Higher Ed." *Inside Higher Ed*, May 5, 2026. Reporting on Strada Education Foundation research.

⁵⁶ Flaherty, C., & Custer, S., eds. (2026). *2026 Survey of College and University Chief Business Officers*. Inside Higher Ed and Hanover Research.

⁵⁷ Tyson, A., & Kennedy, B. (2024). *Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking*. Pew Research Center, November 14, 2024.

we trust research outcomes?" should therefore be taken seriously rather than dismissed as a rejection of expertise. Universities rely on peer review, disciplinary expertise, evidence, replication, transparency, and scholarly debate to establish credibility, but much of that process isn't visible outside academic communities. The Yale Committee argues that university practices need to be understandable to the public and that institutions should be able to demonstrate their decisions with the same quality of evidence they expect in scholarship.⁵⁰ Maintaining public trust may increasingly require universities to explain not only what researchers know, but also how they know it and how research can be translated into the public eye.

Political and Legal Pressures

Political and legal pressures have also become part of public perceptions of higher education. Debates involving curriculum, academic freedom, campus speech, research priorities, diversity initiatives, student protests, and institutional governance increasingly involve legislatures, courts, governing boards, and elected officials. These issues influence the narratives people hear about universities, particularly when national attention is concentrated on controversies at a relatively small number of highly selective institutions. Public perception of "college" may therefore be shaped by institutions and events that do not resemble the experiences of most American college students.

The Yale Committee's analysis illustrates the complexity of this issue. It acknowledges concerns about political homogeneity and self-censorship while also recognizing concerns that external political intervention can threaten academic freedom. The committee found that nearly one-third of Yale undergraduates in a 2025 survey did not feel free to express their political beliefs on campus, while other members of the university community expressed concern about increasing governmental pressure on faculty speech and research.⁵⁰ Both internal conformity and external political interference can therefore create problems for institutional trust.

There is also a gap between public narratives about higher education and the experiences of many students. Inside Higher Ed's 2026 reporting on regional public universities, for example, found that students described experiences centered on academic work, jobs, financial pressures, and career concerns—an everyday reality that can look quite different from the national media's focus on highly selective campuses and political controversies.⁵⁸ This distinction matters because public debate often treats American higher education as though it were a single type of institution with a single student experience.

Tenure and Public Opinion

Public attitudes toward tenure are changing within a broader decline in confidence in higher education. Gallup reported in 2026 that only 38% of U.S. adults had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, down from 57% in 2015.⁵⁹ Concerns

⁵⁸ Whitford, E. (2026). "Regional Public Students Feel Belonging, but Also Financial Stress." *Inside Higher Ed*, June 29, 2026.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Higher Education Slips Back Slightly," *Gallup*, July 13, 2026. Gallup reports 38% confidence in 2026 versus 57% in 2015 and identifies cost, perceived political agendas, and concerns about instruction among the principal reasons for low confidence. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/712322/confidence-higher-education-slips-back-slightly.aspx>

among those expressing low confidence include cost, perceived political agendas, and the nature and quality of instruction. Although these surveys generally do not ask respondents to choose between tenured and non-tenured faculty, they suggest that the public increasingly evaluates higher education through the lenses of value, accountability, responsiveness, and demonstrated performance. Tenure can be difficult to explain in that environment when it is perceived simply as permanent employment rather than as a protection designed to support academic freedom, independent inquiry, long-term scholarship, and faculty participation in institutional governance.

State policy changes increasingly reflect this accountability-oriented view. Florida law requires every tenured state-university faculty member to undergo a comprehensive post-tenure review every five years, addressing productivity, teaching, research, service, performance measures, and consequences for underperformance.⁶⁰ Ohio's 2025 higher-education legislation requires annual faculty performance evaluations and establishes post-tenure review for repeated failure to meet performance expectations, with possible outcomes including remedial action and, for cause, termination.⁶¹ Kentucky enacted legislation in 2025 requiring public universities to establish performance and productivity evaluation processes and permitting removal for failure to meet those requirements regardless of employment status.⁶² South Dakota likewise adopted a five-year post-tenure review cycle beginning in the 2026–27 academic year.⁶³ These policies do not necessarily abolish tenure; rather, they represent a movement toward redefining tenure as continued employment protection accompanied by recurring evidence of professional contribution.

At the same time, higher education has already shifted substantially away from tenure through its own hiring practices. AAUP analysis of federal data finds that only 31.8% of U.S. faculty held full-time tenured or tenure-track appointments in fall 2023, compared with 53.1% in 1987, while 68.2% were employed either part time or in full-time contingent positions ineligible for tenure.⁶⁴ The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) likewise reports that, at institutions maintaining tenure systems, the proportion of full-time faculty holding tenure declined from 48% in 2013–14 to 43% in 2023–24. At public institutions, the share of full-time faculty holding tenure declined from approximately 50%

⁶⁰ Florida Statutes §1001.706(6)(b), requiring comprehensive post-tenure review every five years and consideration of accomplishments, productivity, assigned duties, performance measures, and consequences for underperformance. <https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2025/1001.706>

⁶¹ Ohio Revised Code §§3345.452–3345.453, effective June 27, 2025. The law requires annual evaluations and provides for post-tenure review following repeated failure to meet expectations, with possible administrative actions including remedial training or for-cause termination. <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-3345.452>

⁶² Kentucky General Assembly, House Bill 424, 2025 Regular Session, requiring institutional performance and productivity evaluation processes and permitting removal for failure to meet performance requirements regardless of status. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/25rs/hb424.html>

⁶³ South Dakota Board of Regents, “BOR Adopts New Post-Tenure Review Policy,” December 11, 2025. The policy establishes comprehensive review every five years beginning with implementation in academic year 2026–27. <https://sdbor.edu/news/bor-adopts-new-post-tenure-review-policy-12-11-25/>

⁶⁴ American Association of University Professors, *Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2024–25*. AAUP reports that 31.8% of faculty held full-time tenured or tenure-track appointments in fall 2023, compared with 53.1% in 1987, while 68.2% held contingent appointments. <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/topical-reports/annual-report-economic-status-profession-24-25>

to 46%.⁶⁵ This creates an opportunity for institutions to articulate a more positive value proposition for full-time, non-tenure-track ranks. Teaching professors, clinical faculty, professors of practice, and other career-oriented faculty appointments can emphasize undergraduate teaching, professional expertise, workforce connections, advising, experiential education, or public engagement while giving institutions greater staffing flexibility. The challenge is ensuring that these positions are not perceived, or managed, simply as lower-cost substitutes for tenure-line faculty. Multi-year appointments, meaningful promotion pathways, competitive compensation, appropriate protections for academic freedom, and participation in academic life are important for these ranks to function as durable professional careers.

Public institutions need to demonstrate that faculty structures are aligned with institutional mission and public value. Tenure remains particularly defensible where independence of inquiry, long-term research, academic freedom, and shared governance are essential. Well-designed non-tenure-track careers can provide significant value when teaching, professional practice, clinical work, or workforce engagement are the dominant responsibilities.

The larger issue is transparency. Institutions must be able to explain what faculty in different ranks are expected to accomplish, how performance is evaluated, and how those positions contribute to student learning, research, economic development, and public service. In an environment of declining public trust, demographic and enrollment pressure, and increasing scrutiny of university costs, faculty employment structures that appear disconnected from performance or institutional priorities will become harder to sustain. The political and institutional environment is moving toward greater demands for faculty accountability. Universities themselves have already substantially diversified the faculty workforce beyond the traditional tenure model. In the future, universities that preserve meaningful protections for scholarly independence while also establishing clear expectations, differentiated career paths, regular assessment, equitable compensation, and visible accountability for results will be better positioned for long-term success.

Demographic Change, Enrollment Yield, and Tuition-Mix Risk

The so-called “demographic cliff” will intensify competition for traditional undergraduate students, but its effects will vary substantially by region and institution.⁶⁶ The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) projects that the number of U.S. high school graduates peaked in 2025 and will decline by about 13% by 2041, with 38 states expected to have fewer graduates than in 2023. The decline is expected to be most pronounced in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, while the South is comparatively better positioned demographically.⁶⁷ At the same time, the composition of the college-going

⁶⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, *Condition of Education 2025*, “Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty.” Among institutions with tenure systems, 43% of full-time faculty were tenured in 2023–24, down from 48% in 2013–14; the comparable share at public institutions declined from 50% to 46%. <https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/nces/document/2026/05/2026019.pdf>

⁶⁶ Belkin and Ulick. The Wall Street Journal. “America’s Colleges Are Hurling Toward an Enrollment Cliff.” 21 Aug. 2026. <https://apple.news/Axoq1kT8UQMWPBicCQHD6pw>

⁶⁷ Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, 11th ed. (2024), <https://www.wiche.edu/knocking/> (accessed August 31, 2026).

population is changing, with fewer White and Black high school graduates nationally and growth among Hispanic and multiracial graduates. For public four-year institutions, this means that enrollment planning will depend not only on the size of the graduating class, but also on geographic recruitment patterns, college-going rates, affordability, transfer activity, and the institution's ability to serve an increasingly diverse student population.⁵⁹

Higher education is not facing a single crisis; rather, it is facing a convergence of structural pressures that make the traditional operating model harder to predict and manage.⁵⁸

Overall, enrollment in public four-year institutions has shown some recovery/resiliency, but the underlying demographic problem still remains, suggesting future performance will depend on an institution's capacity to capture market share, retain students, recruit transfers and adults, and reach populations that historically have lower enrollment rates.⁶⁸

Even institutions located in relatively favorable demographic markets (i.e., the South) face growing uncertainty in converting applications into actual enrollment. Application volume is no longer a reliable proxy for future class size: application platforms have made it easier for students to apply to more institutions, while shifting perceptions of higher education, financial aid offers, and increased competition make yield, the percentage of admitted students who ultimately enroll, more difficult to predict. Enrollment managers must also account for “summer melt,” when students who accept or intend to enroll never actually matriculate.⁶⁹ A South Carolina case documented by the National Student Clearinghouse found that in seven Spartanburg County school districts, an expected 80% postsecondary enrollment rate was closer to 60% in actual enrollment, and more than 500 of roughly 2,300 students who intended to enroll did not arrive on campus that fall.⁷⁰ As a result, a university can receive record applications and issue more offers of admission yet still have substantial uncertainty about the size and composition of its entering class until relatively late in the enrollment cycle.

Enrollment management is becoming more about uncertainty management. Application counts can rise while yield becomes harder to predict; students apply to more institutions, compare increasingly aggressive financial aid offers, and may change their decisions late in the cycle. For public universities, the problem is magnified by the importance of the resident/nonresident (in-state/out-of-state) mix. Nationally, average published tuition at public four-year institutions in 2025–26 was about \$11,950 for in-state students versus \$31,880 for out-of-state students.⁷¹ A relatively small change in out-of-state enrollment can therefore have a disproportionate effect on tuition revenue, while aggressive discounting to secure those students can reduce the apparent financial benefit. Institutions increasingly need to forecast not just headcount, but yield by geography, net

⁶⁸ National Student Clearinghouse, Research Center: Postsecondary Enrollment Rises as Academic Trends Shift (January 15, 2026), <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/postsecondary-enrollment-rises-as-academic-trends-shift/>

⁶⁹ EAB, An Enrollment Leader's Guide to Yield and Melt Management (November 13, 2025), <https://eab.com/resources/insight-paper/an-enrollment-leaders-guide-to-yield-and-melt-management/>

⁷⁰ National Student Clearinghouse, Finding Solutions for the “Summer Melt” With StudentTracker (January 19, 2026), <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/solutions-for-summer-melt-with-studenttracker/>

⁷¹ College Board. Trends in College Pricing: Highlights. <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing/highlights>

tuition after aid, retention, transfer flows, and the probability that accepted students matriculate and persist.

More broadly, the higher-education environment is becoming more competitive, more differentiated, and less forgiving of weak value propositions. Four-year public institutions are simultaneously confronting alternative credentials and workforce pathways, changing federal research priorities, tighter graduate and professional loan limits, growing scrutiny of tenure and faculty productivity, demands for clearer employment outcomes, and pressure to explain administrative and research spending. None of these trends individually implies the decline of the public university. Together, however, they make it increasingly difficult to rely on historical assumptions that enrollment will grow, tuition can rise to cover cost increases, federal research will reliably support institutional infrastructure, or students will automatically view a four-year degree as the preferred route into the workforce.

The strategic implication is that institutional adaptability may matter more than institutional growth. The strongest public universities may be those that can:

- distinguish between activities central to their mission and those sustained primarily by historical practice
- understand the actual cost and return of individual academic and research programs
- build flexible pathways for traditional, transfer, adult, and lifelong learners
- align staffing and administrative structures with demonstrable needs
- make a clearer case for the value produced by a public university education

Demographic decline does not mean that every institution must shrink, but it does mean that growth for one institution will increasingly come at the expense of another institution, or from reaching students who previously would not have enrolled at all. In that environment, yield, retention, affordability, program relevance, and public trust become not merely enrollment-management issues, but core elements of institutional strategy.

4. Faculty and Staff Morale

The capacity of universities to navigate the changes facing higher education depends on the people who carry out the mission. Yet there are indications that faculty and staff morale is under significant strain. A 2025 *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey of approximately 4,100 faculty members, staff members, and administrators described persistent exhaustion, evidenced by pandemic-era workloads that increased and remained elevated, open positions that have not been filled, and student support needs that have grown and evolved.⁷² Two-thirds of survey respondents reported working more than they had five years earlier, while nearly one-third characterized their workplace as toxic or frequently dysfunctional.

⁷² Lu, A. 2025. Higher Education Is Exhausted. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/higher-education-is-exhausted>

Trust, Transparency, and Communicating Difficult Decisions

Trust among faculty, staff, administrators, and governing bodies has become an increasingly important issue in higher education. Trust is a prerequisite for effective institutional change. Given the difficult decisions leaders and administrators in higher education institutions are making (e.g., program closures, hiring freezes, reorganizations, budget reductions, changes in workload, or shifts in strategic priorities), results are often judged not just by the outcomes, but by whether employees believe the process was fair, understandable, and candidly communicated. Universities undergoing substantial change need healthy relationships between faculty and administrators. Effective shared governance fundamentally depends on interpersonal and institutional trust.⁷³

Trust is directly related to transparency and perceptions of honesty. When employees do not understand how or why administrators make important decisions, the inevitable and understandable result is resentment. A 2026 integrative review of research on procedural justice and organizational change concluded that clear explanations for decisions, transparent communication, meaningful opportunities for employee voice, and structured feedback can reduce uncertainty and resistance and strengthen trust and commitment.⁷⁴

One important distinction is that transparency does not equate to constant agreement or satisfaction with decisions. Rather, transparency enables employees to understand the rationale (“the why”) behind administrative decisions. Earlier research examining organizations undergoing divestiture similarly found that managerial communication that helped employees understand *why* decisions were made increased perceptions of procedural fairness and, in turn, strengthened organizational commitment.⁷⁵ Without transparent communication, employees develop their own ideas about the rationale governing decisions. Employees (faculty) are more likely to accept an unfavorable decision when they understand the underlying financial or strategic problem, believe relevant information has been disclosed, have had some meaningful opportunity for input, and can see that standards were applied consistently.⁷⁶ Considering the many current and looming pressures affecting higher education in the U.S., a commitment to shared governance and transparency is critical to building and, in many cases, repairing trust.

For any university facing genuine financial and demographic pressures, transparency does not mean promising consensus or disclosing every confidential detail; it means making the logic of institutional decisions visible. What was the problem? What evidence was considered? Which alternatives were evaluated? What were the criteria for decisions? What other options were available? What means were provided for input? What tradeoffs were considered unavoidable? How will outcomes be assessed?

⁷³ Gratz and Looney. 2025. What’s trust got to do with it? Interpersonal and institutional trust in university faculty. *New Directions for Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20519>

⁷⁴ Özdemir, Hüseyin. "Procedural justice, transparent communication and change acceptance: An integrative review." *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 24 (2026): 12.

⁷⁵ Gopinath, Chirukandath, and Thomas E. Becker. "Communication, procedural justice, and employee attitudes: Relationships under conditions of divestiture." *Journal of management* 26, no. 1 (2000): 63-83.

⁷⁶ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/645152/disruptive-change-hitting-leaders-managers-hardest.aspx>

Sharing decision logic is especially important when leaders are simultaneously asking faculty and staff to accept cost reductions, organizational restructuring, program prioritization, or changes in long-standing practices. Trust is damaged less by acknowledging that an institution faces difficult choices than by creating the impression that decisions were predetermined, that criteria were applied inconsistently, or that financial realities were withheld until action was unavoidable. In an increasingly uncertain higher-education environment, the capacity to explain hard choices credibly may itself become an important institutional capability.

Compensation and Workload.

Compensation is an important aspect of morale and long-term faculty welfare. According to the AAUP, faculty salaries are down 9.5% compared to the fall 2019 level, after accounting for inflation and the lack of salary increases.⁷⁷ The same report describes a gender gap in which, across all faculty ranks, women earn, on average, 83.6% of men's average salary.

Compensation concerns are compounded when workloads increase without corresponding increases in staffing or support. The *Chronicle's* national workforce survey found that many higher education employees report absorbing responsibilities previously performed by colleagues who retired, resigned, or were laid off. Faculty have also reported increasing demands associated with student support and institutional initiatives.

Emotional labor and student-related demands were sources of strain during and after the COVID19 pandemic.⁷⁸ Attracting and retaining faculty in academic positions, compared to other career paths, such as those in the private sector, will depend on large-scale improvements in compensation.

Shared governance

Shared governance was built on the principle that governing bodies, administrators, and faculty have distinct but overlapping areas of responsibility, with faculty exercising primary responsibility for academic matters. Increasingly, however, faculty governance at some institutions has been constrained. State-level actions have restricted the activities of, or even eliminated altogether, faculty senates in some locations. Texas⁷⁹ and Alabama⁸⁰ have gone beyond modifying tenure and post-tenure review by restructuring faculty governance itself. Both states enacted laws requiring existing faculty senates at public institutions to be dissolved or affirmatively reauthorized by governing boards, while restricting newly authorized senates to advisory roles. These changes are no longer imminent or theoretical, but ongoing. The trend is not yet a broad nationwide elimination of faculty senates, but a newer movement in a small number of states to shift the legal basis of shared governance from faculty-derived authority to authority explicitly delegated by governing boards.

⁷⁷ <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/topical-reports/annual-report-economic-status-profession-25-26?>

⁷⁸ Cotter, Berheide, and Carpenter, 2024. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-024-09809-3>

⁷⁹ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty/shared-governance/2025/08/22/tex-boards-abolish-faculty-senates-create-toothless>

⁸⁰ <https://alabamareflector.com/2026/06/09/auburn-university-trustees-dissolve-faculty-senate-take-more-direct-curriculum-control/>

Employee voice, through avenues like shared governance, is related to all the other challenges described in this report. Shared governance, or the lack thereof, directly affects ideals such as academic freedom and trust. Preserving employee voice must be a priority linked to institutional agility and resilience, rather than something seen as adversely affecting them. Faculty should be recognized as experts in their respective fields and be used by their institutions when that knowledge enhances effective decision-making by administrators.

Academic freedom

A national study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the AAUP, and the University of Chicago surveyed more than 8,000 faculty members about academic freedom and civil discourse. More than one-third reported that their academic freedom had declined compared with six or seven years earlier: 35% of respondents reported less freedom to teach without interference, 36% reported less freedom to speak as citizens, and 38% reported less freedom when participating in institutional governance.⁸¹ Numerous faculty members across the U.S. were fired following incendiary comments about Charlie Kirk's murder at Utah Valley University in September 2025, and some of them won lawsuits in response to their firing.⁸² Although these examples were diverse and nuanced, this wave of firings ignited a conversation about academic freedom, particularly regarding the use of personal social media accounts, among faculty across the nation.

Academic freedom is closely connected to morale and institutional trust because faculty members must be able to exercise professional judgment, pursue scholarship, teach difficult subjects, and participate candidly in institutional discussions. The emerging challenge for institutions will be to preserve academic freedom and collegial disagreement while navigating concerns about campus speech, donor and political pressures, and institutional responsibilities for maintaining effective learning and working environments.

Academic Freedom, Faculty Morale, and the Competition for Talent

Academic freedom has implications beyond governance and tenure policy; it also impacts institutional capacity to recruit and retain highly qualified faculty. The traditional rationale for tenure explicitly connects the two. The AAUP and Association of American Colleges and Universities' foundational 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure⁸³ argues that academic freedom is essential to teaching and research and that sufficient economic security is necessary to make academic careers attractive to talented individuals.

Although tenure is not the only mechanism for protecting academic freedom, faculty considering competing positions may reasonably evaluate whether they will have the

⁸¹ <https://www.aacu.org/research/academic-freedom-and-civil-discourse-in-higher-education-a-national-study-of-faculty-attitudes-and-perceptions>

⁸² <https://www.aclusc.org/press-releases/fired-clemson-faculty-member-wins-settlement-after-being-fired-for-a-facebook-post-about-charlie-kirk/>
<https://alabamareflector.com/2026/07/07/university-of-alabama-appears-to-settle-with-instructor-fired-after-charlie-kirk-death/>

⁸³ <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/1940%20Statement.pdf>

freedom to pursue research, teach within their areas of expertise, participate in academic decision-making, and express professional judgments without inappropriate political or institutional interference. Institutions perceived as providing less protection in these areas may therefore face a recruitment disadvantage, particularly for established scholars who have attractive alternatives.

Recent experience in several states provides evidence that these concerns can translate into faculty mobility. Surveys conducted by AAUP-affiliated organizations in Texas found that academic freedom, the state's political climate, tenure, shared governance, and compensation were among the reasons faculty reported considering employment elsewhere. In a 2024 Texas survey of more than 950 faculty members, 61% said they would not recommend Texas to an out-of-state colleague seeking a faculty position, 26% planned to interview elsewhere, and respondents reported that candidates hesitated or declined positions because of the state's higher-education environment.⁸⁴ A larger 2025 survey reported similar concerns.⁸⁵ Florida has experienced comparable debate: an AAUP investigation reported substantial faculty concern about political interference and academic freedom, while subsequent empirical research found that implementation of Florida's post-tenure-review policy was associated with an increase in departures among tenure-track faculty without a corresponding increase in measured research productivity.⁸⁵ While AAUP is an advocacy organization for faculty interests, these reports provide evidence that the policy and governance environment can become part of the labor market in which universities compete for faculty.

Compensation remains an equally important and more readily measurable retention issue. COACHE's national Faculty Retention and Exit Survey, administered through the Harvard Graduate School of Education, found salary to be the strongest individual reason faculty reported considering departure, cited by 33% of respondents; quality of colleagues, institutional reputation, opportunities for professional growth and intellectual stimulation, family considerations, and opportunities for collaboration were also important.⁸⁶ Recent compensation trends create additional pressure. AAUP's 2025–26 Faculty Compensation Survey found that average full-time faculty salaries increased 2.3% from fall 2024 to fall 2025 while consumer prices increased 2.7%, producing another slight decline in real purchasing power.⁶⁴ Average inflation-adjusted full-time faculty salaries remained approximately 9.5% below their fall 2019 level.⁶⁴ CUPA-HR similarly found that, by 2025–26, inflation-adjusted salaries remained about 11.7% below 2019–20 levels for tenure-track faculty and 6.8% below that level for non-tenure-track teaching faculty.⁸⁷ Thus, even institutions providing nominal annual raises may encounter morale and retention problems

⁸⁴ Texas' political climate driving faculty to leave. 18 mar 2025. <https://aaup-texas.org/blog/f/texas'-political-climate-driving-faculty-to-leave>

⁸⁵ Report of a Special Committee: Political Interference and Academic Freedom in Florida's Public Higher Education System. 2023. https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/AAUP_Florida_final.pdf

⁸⁶ Why Do Faculty Leave or Stay?: COACHE Faculty Retention and Exit Survey Highlights Top Factors. 2023. <https://coache.gse.harvard.edu/blog/why-do-faculty-leave-or-stay-coache-faculty-retention-and-exit-survey-highlights-top>

⁸⁷ CUPA-HR. "Workforce Pay Increases." <https://www.cupahr.org/resource/workforce-pay-increases/>

if faculty perceive that compensation has failed to keep pace with inflation, external labor markets, housing costs, or compensation at peer institutions.

Faculty morale cannot be reduced to salary alone. COACHE's work on faculty job satisfaction examines shared governance, institutional leadership, departmental collegiality, recognition, research and teaching support, promotion processes, workload, and retention because these factors collectively shape the faculty employment experience.⁸⁸ The quality of colleagues and institutional or departmental reputation can be nearly as consequential as compensation, while opportunities for intellectual growth and collaboration also affect mobility.⁸⁸ Workload is another important component. Growing expectations for teaching, advising, research productivity, grant activity, service, assessment, compliance, and administrative tasks can undermine morale when faculty perceive that responsibilities have increased without corresponding resources, recognition, compensation, or influence over institutional decisions. In this sense, shared governance and transparent communication are not merely procedural traditions; they can influence whether faculty feel respected as professionals and committed to the institution.

For public universities, faculty recruitment and retention should be understood as a multidimensional competitiveness issue. Salary matters, particularly after several years of erosion in real compensation, but institutions compete in an entire professional environment: academic freedom, job security, research support, teaching resources, workload, quality of colleagues, leadership, recognition, advancement opportunities, shared governance, geographic attractiveness, and confidence in institutional direction. A university can lose talented faculty even when its salaries are nominally competitive if employees conclude that they lack professional autonomy, institutional support, or a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their work.

Conversely, academic freedom and collegial governance cannot fully compensate for persistently below-market salaries or unsustainable workloads. As competition for faculty talent intensifies, particularly in high-demand research and professional fields, institutions that can combine competitive compensation with professional autonomy, credible leadership, manageable expectations, strong research and teaching support, and visible respect for faculty expertise are likely to be better positioned to recruit and retain the people on whom the academic mission ultimately depends.

Operational Support

There is a growing gap between institutional expectations for faculty and staff and the operational support needed to meet them. Three areas illustrate the challenge particularly clearly: online education, artificial intelligence, and student accessibility.

Online and hybrid education. Online education has become a routine component of higher education, with some clear benefits but also drawbacks. *The Chronicle's* 2025 Trends Report described virtual courses as moving from an exception to an expectation, including among traditional-aged residential students, with implications for staffing and faculty support. Effective online instruction requires thoughtful instructional design, technology

⁸⁸ COACHE. Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey. <https://coache.gse.harvard.edu/faculty-job-satisfaction-survey>

support, faculty development, and accessible course materials. Assuming that the development and delivery of online courses is equivalent to traditional in-person courses would be a mistake.

Artificial intelligence. Faculty are increasingly expected to determine appropriate AI use in courses, redesign assessments, interpret implications for academic integrity, and prepare students for workplaces in which AI will be commonplace. Yet institutional policies, training, and technical support lag behind technology. AI can make routine tasks more efficient while also creating new responsibilities involving verification, ethical judgment, academic integrity, and instructional redesign. Thus, whether AI ultimately reduces or increases workload depends on ethical clarity and technical infrastructure⁸⁹.

Student accessibility. Faculty are responsible for fostering inclusive and accessible learning environments, but faculty members cannot reasonably be expected to become experts in disability law and web accessibility. For public institutions, this issue has taken on additional urgency following the Department of Justice's updated Title II regulations, which establish WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the accessibility standard for web content and mobile applications provided by state and local government entities, with compliance deadlines beginning in 2027.⁹⁰ As the complexity of teaching increases, institutions need corresponding investments in the infrastructure supporting educational accessibility.

5. Administrative Support for Academic Mission and Academic Freedom

The relationship between university administration and the academic mission represents another important consideration for the future of higher education. Institutions require professional expertise in financial management, research administration, information technology and cybersecurity, accreditation, regulatory compliance, accessibility, student services, enrollment management, advancement, facilities, human resources, and many other areas that make teaching and research possible. The complexity of these functions has also increased.

Federal research requirements, for example, require universities to manage grant accounting, human-subject protections, research security, conflicts of interest, procurement, subrecipient monitoring, financial reporting, and audit requirements. The National Academies concluded in both its 2016 and 2025 reviews of research regulation that the volume and complexity of federal requirements can impose substantial administrative burdens on universities and divert researcher time from scholarship.⁹¹⁻⁹² The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) has similarly documented cases in which new federal requirements led universities to hire administrative personnel, establish compliance offices, implement new information systems, and expand oversight

⁸⁹ Su et al. 2026. Efficiency or intensification? A systematic review of generative AI and academic workload in higher education. *Acta Psychologica*, 268, 107353. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2026.107353>

⁹⁰ <https://www.ada.gov/resources/web-rule-first-steps/>

⁹¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Optimizing the Nation's Investment in Academic Research* (2016). <https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/21824/chapter/3>

⁹² National Academies, *Simplifying Research Regulations and Policies: Optimizing American Science* (2025). <https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/29231/chapter/3>

activities.⁹³ Administrative capacity therefore should not automatically be characterized as “bloat”; much of it represents infrastructure necessary to conduct contemporary teaching and research responsibly.

At the same time, the growth and allocation of administrative resources are legitimate subjects for institutional scrutiny. Universities face an opportunity cost whenever additional resources are devoted to one activity rather than another, whether the expenditure is classified as administration, instruction, research, student support, or facilities. National workforce data also demonstrate that the composition of university employment has changed over time. The National Center for Education Statistics tracks substantial numbers of employees in management, business and financial operations, student and academic affairs, information technology, and other professional-support occupations in addition to instructional faculty.⁹⁴ More recent data from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources show particularly strong growth in full-time staff employment following the pandemic, with full-time staff headcount at participating institutions increasing by 6.5% in 2024 alone, compared with more modest growth in faculty.⁹⁵ These national patterns are consistent with the South Carolina data examined in this report, where management and business/financial staffing per student FTE increased, while traditional office and administrative support staffing declined.

Simply comparing the number of “administrators” with the number of faculty can be misleading. Definitions matter. A grants administrator who enables faculty to compete for federal awards, an accessibility specialist who helps students participate fully in instruction, a cybersecurity professional who protects research data, or an academic advisor who improves student outcomes may all be classified as professional or administrative employees while directly supporting academic outcomes. Conversely, administrative structures can become unnecessarily layered, duplicative, or disconnected from front-line academic activity. Support costs are the real costs of accomplishing the academic or research mission. Institutions should examine cost efficiency and demonstrate why a support function exists, what mission-related activity it enables, whether staffing has grown proportionately to workload, and whether the same objective could be accomplished more efficiently.

The relationship between administration and the academic mission also extends beyond financial efficiency to **academic freedom and shared governance**. American higher education has traditionally divided authority among governing boards, administrators, and faculty rather than assigning all institutional decisions to any one group. The widely recognized 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, jointly developed by the AAUP, American Council on Education, and Association of Governing Boards, assigns different areas of primary responsibility to boards, administrators, and faculty and emphasizes faculty responsibility for academic matters such as curriculum, instruction,

⁹³ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Federal Research Grants: Opportunities Remain for Agencies to Streamline Administrative Requirements* (GAO-16-573). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-16-573>

⁹⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics/IPEDS Human Resources. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/current_tables

⁹⁵ CUPA-HR. “Changes in Workforce Size.” 18 Aug 2026. <https://www.cupahr.org/resource/changes-in-workforce-size-2/>

research, and faculty status.⁹⁶ Administrative leadership is most supportive of the academic mission when it creates the institutional conditions in which faculty can exercise professional judgment, pursue independent scholarship, teach controversial or evolving ideas, and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect academic programs. Recent disputes over tenure, faculty senates, curricular authority, and political intervention make this relationship increasingly consequential. Administrative efficiency that weakens legitimate academic independence or substitutes managerial decision-making for appropriate faculty expertise can produce costs that are difficult to capture in conventional financial reports.

Ultimately, administration and faculty should not be viewed as competing components of the university. Both are necessary, and the strongest institutions are likely to be those in which their roles are mutually reinforcing. The more useful strategic question is:

Do our administrative structures remain oriented toward enabling teaching, research, student learning, academic freedom, and the generation and dissemination of knowledge?

Administrative growth should likely be evaluated based on the problems these positions aim to solve, the value created, and the proportionality of administrative capacity to the academic activity they support. As higher education confronts tighter enrollment markets, greater scrutiny of costs, changing research requirements, and declining public trust, institutions that can answer those questions transparently will be better positioned to demonstrate both operational discipline and commitment to their academic mission.

6. Student Success

The Changing National Higher Education Landscape. Higher education in the United States is reconsidering what it means for students to be successful. Traditionally, success has been measured through enrollment, grades, retention, credit completion, and graduation. Those measures still matter, but they do not tell the whole story. Increasingly, students, families, employers, and policymakers are asking a broader question: What should a college graduate be able to do as a result of their education?

This question comes at a time of significant change. Concerns about college affordability and debt, student mental health, changing workforce expectations, artificial intelligence, declining confidence in higher education, and the growing number of adult learners are shaping how colleges and universities think about their roles. National discussions are increasingly focused not only on whether students graduate, but on what they learn, what they are prepared to do, and whether they can apply their education after college.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ AAUP/ACE/AGB, "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities." https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/Statement_on_Government_of_Colleges_and_Universities.pdf

⁹⁷ Deloitte Center for Government Insights. 2025 Higher Education Trends. <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/articles-on-higher-education/2025-us-higher-education-trends.html>

Student Well-Being

Mental health and well-being have become central to discussions of student success. Student distress, financial stress, loneliness, and concerns about belonging can affect academic performance and persistence. Recent national data show that many college students continue to report significant mental health challenges, particularly students who are considering dropping out.⁹⁸

As a result, colleges are beginning to view well-being as more than a student-services issue. The larger question is how institutions can create environments that support students academically, socially, and personally. This raises questions about the role of faculty, curriculum, advising, and campus life in helping students thrive.

From Graduation to Learning

Graduation remains an important measure of success, but there is growing interest in what the degree represents. A transcript shows the courses a student completed and the grades earned, but it may not fully demonstrate what a graduate can do.

This concern has become more important as artificial intelligence changes how students learn and how work is performed. Colleges are increasingly exploring competency-based education, authentic assessment, portfolios, and other approaches that provide evidence of what students know and can do. The U.S. Department of Education has also recognized competency-based approaches that focus on demonstrated learning rather than simply time spent in courses.⁹⁹

The national question is becoming less about “Did the student graduate?” and more about “What can the graduate demonstrate?”

Rethinking the Four-Year Degree

The traditional four-year, 120-credit bachelor's degree remains the dominant model, but there is growing experimentation with three-year degrees, accelerated pathways, dual enrollment, prior-learning credit, competency-based education, and stackable credentials. To reduce costs and shorten the time to receive a degree, several universities are offering a 90-credit degree. These degrees are designed to be attractive to adults, those looking to change careers, and students who can achieve the learning outcomes in a shorter timeframe.¹⁰⁰ This is not without precedent. Many Architecture and Landscape Architecture programs have transitioned from 5-year degree programs to 4-year degree programs over the past several decades.

The issue is not simply whether students should finish college faster. Rather, it is whether time should be the primary measure of education. If students can demonstrate the same learning outcomes in less time, should they have to follow the traditional four-year path?

⁹⁸ *Inside Higher Ed*. “College Student Mental Health Remains a Wicked Problem.” October 30, 2025.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/health-wellness/2025/10/30/college-student-mental-health-remains-wicked>

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of Education. *Direct Assessment (Competency-Based) Programs*. <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/higher-education-laws-and-policy/higher-education-policy/direct-assessment-competency-based-programs>

¹⁰⁰ Saidi-Kuehnert, J. (2026). *The new three-year bachelor's degree in the U.S.: A series*. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. <https://www.aacrao.org/news/the-new-three-year-bachelor-s-degree-in-the-u.s.-a-series>

The Skills for the Future Initiative was established by Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching¹⁰¹ and the Educational Testing Service¹⁰² to study a transition from time-based education to competency-based education. At the same time, institutions must consider whether acceleration could reduce opportunities for research, internships, service learning, and the broader intellectual experiences associated with college.

Affordability and Access

Affordability has become a central part of student success. Access is no longer simply a question of whether students can gain admission. It is also whether they can afford to enroll, remain enrolled, graduate, and manage the debt associated with earning a degree.

For 2025-26, average published tuition and fees were approximately \$11,950 for in-state students at public four-year institutions, \$31,880 for out-of-state students, and \$45,000 at private nonprofit four-year institutions.¹⁰³ These costs do not include housing, food, transportation, books, and other expenses. Financial aid remains critical, with students having received approximately \$173.7 billion in grant aid in 2024-25, including \$38.6 billion in Pell Grants.⁹⁷

These trends raise larger questions about the value of higher education. How much should a college education cost? How much debt is reasonable? How does financial stress affect student success? And how should institutions demonstrate that the benefits of a degree justify the investment?

Socioeconomic and Geographic Access

Access also has a socioeconomic and geographic dimension. Students enter higher education with very different financial resources, academic preparation, family responsibilities, and access to social and professional networks. Simply increasing enrollment does not guarantee that students will have equitable opportunities to graduate and benefit from their education.

Geography is also important. The traditional residential model assumes that students can relocate to a campus and participate in a full-time, place-based experience. That model does not work equally well for working adults, parents, rural students, or others who cannot relocate. Online, hybrid, regional, and community-based programs are challenging the idea that higher education must be tied to a particular physical location.

Rethinking College Readiness

The national debate over standardized testing is part of a larger discussion about how colleges determine whether students are prepared for college-level work. The growth of test-optional admissions has led institutions to reconsider the role of SAT and ACT scores, while some institutions have returned to testing requirements.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (n.d.). *Skills for the Future Initiative*. <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/skills-for-the-future-initiative/>

¹⁰² *ets (Educational Testing Service). <https://www.ets.org/about.html>

¹⁰³ College Board Research. Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025. <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends>

¹⁰⁴ Hoover. "U. of California Will Reassess Testing Policy Over Next Year." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/u-of-california-will-reassess-testing-policy-over-next-year>

The larger question is what evidence best predicts student success. High school grades, course rigor, standardized tests, portfolios, interviews, projects, and other measures each provide different information.¹⁰⁵⁻¹⁰⁶ The continuing debate reflects a broader reconsideration of what it means to be “college ready.”

Experiential Learning and Career Preparation

There is also growing national interest in connecting academic learning to real-world experience. Internships, undergraduate research, service learning, study abroad, clinical experiences, entrepreneurship, and community-based projects give students opportunities to apply what they learn.

Real-world experience is increasingly important as employers look for graduates who can solve problems, communicate, collaborate, adapt, and work effectively with others. Experiential learning can help students develop those abilities while also giving them a clearer understanding of how their education connects to careers and communities.

An important access question follows: Does every student have an equal opportunity to participate in these experiences? Internships, study abroad, and unpaid research opportunities can carry financial and time costs that may make participation more difficult for some students.

Human and Durable Skills

The term “soft skills” is increasingly being replaced by “durable skills,” “human skills,” and “transferable skills.” Communication, collaboration, problem solving, leadership, adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking are consistently identified as important in the workplace.

The growth of artificial intelligence makes these skills even more important. As technology takes on more routine cognitive tasks, higher education will need to consider what capabilities students uniquely need to develop as humans. This includes judgment, creativity, ethical reasoning, communication, and the ability to work with others in complex situations.

Traditional Students and Lifelong Learners

The traditional 18-24-year-old residential student is no longer the only student population higher education must consider. Colleges increasingly serve working students, parents, part-time students, transfer students, returning students, career changers, and adults seeking additional credentials. The large population of adults with some college education, but no completed credential, is particularly important. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center continues to identify these “some college, no credential” students as an important population for re-engagement and degree completion.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Friedman, John N., et al. 2025. "Standardized test scores and academic performance at ivy plus colleges." *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. 115.

¹⁰⁶ Huber, David E., Andrew L. Cohen, and Adrian Staub. 2022. "A 'compensatory selection' effect with standardized tests: Lack of correlation between test scores and success is evidence that test scores are predictive of success." *Plos one* 17(5): e0265459.

¹⁰⁷ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. *Some College, No Credential*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/>

These trends point toward a broader conception of higher education as lifelong learning. Rather than education occurring primarily between the ages of 18 and 22, individuals may move repeatedly between education and employment as careers and industries change. Stackable credentials, professional certificates, continuing education, online programs, and other flexible options may become increasingly important.

A Changing Definition of Student Success

Taken together, these trends suggest that the national definition of student success is expanding. Graduation remains important, but it is increasingly viewed as one part of a larger outcome that includes learning, well-being, experience, career preparation, economic mobility, and lifelong learning.

The *traditional* model might be described as:

Enrollment → Courses → Grades → Retention → Graduation

The *emerging model* is closer to:

Access → Learning → Experience → Competencies → Career and life outcomes → Lifelong learning

The central question for higher education is therefore no longer simply how to help more students graduate. It is:

What should a college graduate be able to know, do, demonstrate, and contribute, and how should higher education change to make those outcomes possible?

This question provides a useful starting point for examining the future of student success across American higher education.

Conclusions

Higher education is not confronting a single crisis, but a convergence of structural pressures that make the traditional university model less predictable. Demographic change, shifting federal policy, alternative credentials, artificial intelligence, declining public trust, and growing expectations for accountability are all reshaping the environment in which public universities operate. None of these forces alone implies institutional decline, but together they weaken assumptions that enrollment will continue to grow, that tuition can absorb rising costs, that federal research support will remain stable, or that students will automatically view the four-year degree as the preferred pathway to opportunity.

The financial evidence in this report suggests that the challenge is increasingly one of *resource allocation and mission alignment*, not simply cost reduction. Among the South Carolina public institutions examined, real total expenditures per student changed relatively little over the past decade, but spending shifted away from instruction and academic support toward research and institutional support. Staffing likewise shifted from traditional office support toward more specialized managerial and professional roles. These changes do not demonstrate that administrative growth is unnecessary, but they do

make it increasingly important to ask whether resources are growing in proportion to need, what mission-related problems they address, and what measurable value they create.

Universities will also need to adapt to a more diverse and competitive student market. The traditional residential four-year pathway will remain important, but it will increasingly coexist with transfer pathways, online and hybrid education, adult learners, microcredentials, employer-supported education, and other forms of lifelong learning. At the same time, student success is being defined more broadly, not only by retention and graduation, but by demonstrated learning, competencies, career preparation, well-being, mobility, and the ability to adapt over a lifetime. The continuing value of the university will depend in part on clearly articulating what students gain from sustained engagement with faculty, disciplinary knowledge, research, mentorship, experiential learning, and the development of judgment, communication, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning.

The people who carry out the academic mission will be central to institutional resilience. Faculty and staff recruitment, retention, and morale are influenced by compensation, workload, academic freedom, shared governance, professional autonomy, recognition, and confidence in institutional leadership. Similarly, effective administration is essential when it enables rather than impedes teaching, research, student support, and scholarly work. The future university should therefore not frame faculty and administration as competing interests but ask whether both are organized around shared institutional purposes and whether employees have the support, voice, and professional environment necessary to perform their work effectively.

Trust is especially important as institutions make difficult choices. Program prioritization, budget reductions, restructuring, staffing decisions, and shifts in strategic direction may be unavoidable. Transparency does not require consensus, but the reasoning behind important decisions should be visible: the problem being addressed, the evidence considered, the alternatives evaluated, the criteria applied, and the tradeoffs involved. Institutions that communicate difficult decisions credibly and provide meaningful opportunities for input will be positioned to maintain cooperation and trust.

The central strategic challenge for public higher education is *adaptation without loss of mission*. Universities must become more flexible, accountable, efficient, and responsive while preserving rigorous inquiry, academic freedom, faculty expertise, meaningful student learning, research, and public service. The strongest institutions will be those that can distinguish enduring purposes from historical practices, allocate resources deliberately, support the people responsible for the academic enterprise, and clearly demonstrate the distinctive public value they create.