

# A Blueprint for Strengthening and Transforming Higher Education

## Introduction

Public colleges and universities are indispensable to a democratic society. They shape our collective and individual futures, expand opportunity, strengthen local and regional economies, support arts and culture, and prepare each generation to participate fully in civic and economic life. Our colleges and universities fuel innovation, supply skilled workers, staff hospitals and classrooms, support small businesses and anchor entire communities—especially in rural areas and regional hubs where colleges are often the largest and most stable employers. Higher education’s promise and purpose have been hollowed out through skyrocketing tuition, political attacks, and a focus on a corporate model rather than on the people higher education was created to support.

Across our country, families are struggling to pay the bills, put food on the table and keep up with rising tuition and stagnant wages. Students take on tens of thousands of dollars in debt before they earn their first paycheck. Parents delay retirement or assume new financial burdens to keep opportunities open for their children. At the same time, the current administration and its allies have launched an unprecedented campaign to control higher education—attacking academic freedom, defunding research and attempting to remake colleges and universities to serve narrow political agendas rather than the public good.

Cuts in federal and state funding have undermined our institutions’ ability to meet their missions. Faculty and staff increasingly work in unstable conditions that undermine teaching, research and student learning and support. Colleges—particularly community colleges and regional public institutions—are stretched thin, even as expectations for access, completion, workforce preparation and research

Across this country, families are struggling to pay the bills, put food on the table and keep up with rising tuition and stagnant wages, while fearing that a college education now means a lifetime of debt. At the same time, the current administration and its allies have attacked education—higher education in particular, and the academic freedom, innovation and broad-based opportunity it promises.

We are fighting to make college the public good it should be: affordable and accessible, not a privilege for the wealthy. In the richest country in the world, no one should have to mortgage their future to learn. We need colleges and universities that are central to a strong economy, world-leading research that saves lives, and a vibrant democracy, and their promise must belong to all of us. We will win this by coming together—students, workers, families and communities—to demand the public investment and shared commitment that higher education, and our democracy, deserve.

excellence continue to rise. Communities that depend on colleges and universities as engines of opportunity, even as those institutions are asked to do more with less, suffer as economic opportunity is diminished. A society that weakens its colleges and universities weakens its capacity to innovate, protect public health, respond to crises and improve quality of life.

We can restore the promise and potential of higher education by coming together—students, workers, families and communities—to demand the public investment and shared commitment that higher education and our democracy deserve. Our policy platform advances a vision of higher education as a public good and a democratic necessity, and it pairs that vision with practical, achievable reforms. We must begin by affirming students’ right to learn; ensuring affordability, accessibility and completion; strengthening communities and regional economies; and respecting the faculty and staff whose labor makes higher education possible. The goal is not to return to the past, but to build a system that is affordable, accountable and worthy of public trust.

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## A Shared Vision for Higher Education

We are fighting for a future in which:

- **Public higher education is free and all higher education is debt-free**, supported by robust and sustained public investment.
- All higher education workers enjoy **dignified work**, meaningful pathways to job security and fair compensation.
- **Intellectual freedom and freedom of speech and protest** are fully protected for faculty, staff and students.
- **True shared governance** exists, with faculty and staff holding real decision-making authority over academic matters, budgets and institutional priorities.
- A renewed **commitment to the public good** affirms that the purpose of higher education is to help solve the pressing problems of society by extending teaching, research and public service beyond campus boundaries. This includes robust public extension programs, community-engaged research, publicly accessible scholarship, and sustained partnerships with local, state and regional communities.
- **Research is publicly funded**, independent and oriented toward the public good.
- **Historically Black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, predominantly Black institutions and other minority-serving institutions** are fully and equitably funded to thrive.
- **Career and technical education** programs are supported and enhanced. While college should be available and accessible to all, everyone deserves access to education and training that leads to well-paying jobs and dignity in the workplace.

## Practical Steps We Must Take Now

Immediate, achievable reforms are essential to stabilize higher education and protect those within it. These include:

- Making higher education **more affordable and accessible now**, through expanded public funding, debt relief, expanded free college programs where possible and strengthened grant programs.
- Enforcing **real academic freedom protections** and stopping political and donor interference.
- Securing **collective bargaining rights**, fair pay and job security for all faculty, staff and student workers.

- Establishing **artificial intelligence guardrails** that provide meaningful protections for academic workers and ensure that students are receiving the education they deserve.
- Expanding student support systems that improve **retention, completion and basic needs security**.
- Increasing **near-term funding** for research and under-resourced institutions.
- Providing robust federal **investment in publicly accountable research** through agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and other federal programs, ensuring that scientific discovery and innovation serve the public good rather than narrow corporate interests.

The AFT and the American Association of University Professors' higher education platform is designed both to strengthen higher education today and to realize a brighter future for higher education and the students, staff and communities America's colleges and universities serve and empower.

## Pillar I: Students' Right to Learn

Students have a fundamental right to learn in environments that are open, inclusive and free from political interference.

### Core Commitments

We must ensure and protect students' right to:

- Be taught by faculty whose teaching and research are protected by **academic freedom**, free from censorship or political interference.
- **Speak out, organize and dissent** without fear that their enrollment, financial aid, employment or academic standing will be threatened.
- Access a **full range of academic programs and courses** that allow them to explore diverse ideas, disciplines and careers.
- Learn in institutions that reflect and support a **diverse student body and workforce**.

These rights are essential to advancing knowledge, fostering critical thinking and sustaining a multiracial, pluralistic, democratic society. They depend on **true shared governance**, in which faculty and staff have real authority over curriculum, academic standards and institutional priorities.

## Pillar II: Affordability, Accessibility and Completion

### Affordability

Higher education must be affordable for all.

Student loans are not the answer. They saddle students and families with crushing debt—now totaling more than \$1.7 trillion nationally—while shifting the cost of a public good onto individuals. Federal and state governments must reverse decades of disinvestment by restoring and expanding public funding for higher education.

## Core Commitments

Federal and state governments should develop policy to reverse decades of disinvestment, restoring and expanding public funding for higher education by:

- Implementing **progressive tax systems**, in which wealthy individuals and corporations pay their fair share.
- Expanding and strengthening **Pell grants**, indexed to inflation.
- Significantly increasing **funding for TRIO** and similar access programs.
- Expanding and adequately funding programs that **reduce non-tuition barriers** such as housing, food insecurity, child care and transportation.
- Ensuring chronically underfunded **HBCUs, TCUs, HSIs and other minority-serving institutions** receive the sustained resources they need to serve students and communities.
- Ensuring that college and university **finances are transparent** and that resources support teaching, research and student success—rather than flowing to for-profit partners, consultants or executive excess.
- Developing **guardrails to prevent public institutions from shielding decisions** through opaque endowments or auxiliary structures.
- Ensuring that **endowments**—especially at R1 institutions (doctoral universities with very high research activity) and wealthy institutions—are managed and deployed to **advance affordability, accessibility, community well-being and the public mission** of higher education, with full transparency and meaningful public accountability.

## Accessibility

Accessibility goes beyond affordability. It includes access to programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels that provide education and training so that all individuals can grow intellectually and have the opportunity for economic security and dignity at work.

## Core Commitments

To ensure accessibility, we are committed to:

- Expanding **exposure to higher education early** in the education process, particularly for students from families and communities historically excluded from college.
- Investing in expanded programs for **early college**, and ensuring union and faculty involvement in the establishment of **dual enrollment, CTE and community-based pathways**.
- Strengthening and fully funding **liberal arts** education as essential to a college degree.
- Ensuring that funding and resources are directed toward **teaching and student support**, not toward the creation of more deans, vice presidents and other management positions.
- Increasing institutional investment in and support of **first-generation, undocumented, disabled and working students**.

## Completion

Access without completion is not enough. There must be robust investment in programs and staffing to support students after they have enrolled.

## Core Commitments

To promote student completion, we are committed to:

- Expanding **experiential education and CTE** at the secondary level.
- Expanding **evidence-based advising, mentoring, academic support and bridge programs** at the college level, so that students not only enroll, but graduate and thrive.

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## Pillar III: Strengthening Our Communities

Two-year and four-year colleges and universities are anchor institutions in the economic, civic and social lives of their communities. They are often the communal cultural hub and the largest employer in their regions. This role reflects a long public tradition that the work of colleges and universities should serve the broader public and improve lives well beyond the classroom.

### Core Commitments

To support institutions' role in strengthening their communities, we are committed to:

- Ensuring that higher education provides pathways to **economic mobility** and stable, unionized jobs.
- Increasing funding for research and innovation that drives **regional and national economies** and supports **critical public needs**, including healthcare, technological innovation and climate resilience.
- Strengthening existing and develop new **partnerships** with local communities to address shared challenges, not extract resources or displace residents.

Public investment in higher education is an investment in community stability, public health, democratic participation and long-term prosperity.

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## Pillar IV: Respecting and Empowering Faculty, Staff and Student Workers

Higher education cannot fulfill its mission without respecting and protecting the workers who make it possible. Every worker deserves, at a minimum, a living wage and access to healthcare and retirement benefits. Yet many academic workers are making poverty-level wages without the stability and benefits of full-time employment and job security. The erosion of secure academic labor is not incidental; it is a central feature of a market-driven model that prioritizes flexibility, austerity and managerial control over educational quality and democratic governance.

### Core Commitments

To ensure respect and empowerment for higher education workers, we are committed to:

- Expanding **collective bargaining rights** for faculty and staff at all public institutions.
- Expanding **collective bargaining rights at private institutions**, including overturning the U.S. Supreme Court's *NLRB v. Yeshiva* decision.

- **Reversing the excessive reliance on contingent labor** by converting contingent faculty positions to secure, full-time tenure-line ones, and prioritizing the appointment of long-serving contingent faculty to those positions.
- **Ending “right to work.”**
- Fighting for **fair and equitable compensation** for all higher education workers.
- **Ending the privatization and outsourcing** of university jobs to for-profit corporations.
- Supporting **robust academic freedom protections** ensuring that teaching, research and public service are not constrained by political or donor pressure.
- Establishing **true shared governance** that works alongside collective bargaining, with faculty and staff holding real decision-making authority over academic matters, budgets and institutional priorities—not merely advisory roles.

Shared governance must be real, enforceable and respected. **To ensure accountability, institutions receiving public funds should be required to meet clear shared-governance standards**, including faculty and staff decision-making authority over academic matters and meaningful participation in budgetary and strategic decisions, with transparency and enforceable remedies when governance is violated. Faculty and staff—not corporate administrators or political appointees—must make final decisions on curriculum, academic standards and research priorities.

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## Conclusion

Higher education is not a political weapon, a corporate investment strategy or a low-wage labor market. It is a public good, sustained by workers, fundamental to individual growth and attainment, essential to democracy and central to our shared future.

Through teaching, research and public service, colleges and universities sustain free inquiry, advance knowledge and cultivate the informed citizens a democratic society depends on.

Together, the AAUP and the AFT are fighting to make higher education the public good it should be: affordable and accessible, not a privilege for the wealthy; a central hub for world-leading research; a driver of a vibrant democracy. This platform outlines a path forward to strengthen higher education by defending it from political capture, restoring public investment, respecting labor and recentering student learning so that students receive the education they deserve.