



AFT Higher
Education

Higher Education Consultants REPORT

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Our Mission

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Introduction

Colleges and universities across the country are increasingly under attack. Legislatures are cutting budgets, conservative activists are attacking campus speech, and the federal government is weaponizing grant funding. The AFT is on the frontlines fighting against attacks on education. In the course of our work supporting members, we see a rise in colleges and universities engaging higher education consultancies that specialize in guiding institutions of higher learning through difficult financial times. These companies collect exorbitant fees and amass student data while recommending policy changes that treat colleges and universities solely as businesses. Those recommendations often lead to cuts in degree offerings or outright closure, leaving students scrambling to complete degrees or certificates.

The intent of this report is to help our leaders and members prepare to fight back when their employing institution brings one of these consultants to campus. When administrators hire these consulting firms, they are often presented as outside experts with preternatural abilities to identify and fix even the direst of financial challenges. A review of their past engagements shows that not only are these firms often incapable of righting the ship—their recommendations have often proven detrimental to the institutions they serve and harmful to the relationship between faculty and administrators.

The College of Saint Rose in Albany, N.Y., provides a cautionary tale. The college hired EAB for at least eight years to recruit students and boost enrollment. The college paid EAB and an affiliate a total of over \$6.4 million. In December 2023, The College of Saint Rose announced its closure. Instead of boosting enrollment and retention, during EAB's tenure the college's "enrollment plummeted 36 percent from a high of 4,004 students in 2019 to 2,566 students in 2023." EAB profited while students suffered.¹

In another case, students, faculty and the West Virginia community fought back when the Board of Governors of West Virginia University announced that it would eliminate 32 academic programs. This announcement came after WVU hired rpk GROUP to advise the university on "academic portfolio optimization" to address a budget deficit. These massive cuts left West Virginians without key programs at their flagship university and many students unable to complete their degrees.²

AFT President Randi Weingarten wrote in her letter to the WVU Board of Governors:

The impact of these cuts on the surrounding community is ... dire. West Virginia University is the largest employer in Monongalia County. Layoffs on campus will significantly affect families and the local economy. These effects will be felt not by just the families of the WVU faculty and staff facing layoffs, but also by the local businesses and retailers who serve the community and who depend on WVU employees spending money in their shops.³

The presence of the consulting firms on campus should be a red flag. Their involvement is a first step in a shift in policy, as many make no attempt to engage with faculty and often avoid participating in existing governance structures that involve faculty representatives. Their hiring will almost certainly lead to cuts in the academic programs, restructuring of the institution (via closure, merger or acquisition) and layoffs, likely without consultation with faculty and staff. Closing programs or the institution itself, and the disruption that follows, harms students, who may struggle to find a way to finish their degrees without significant additional debt and may end up no longer having access to higher education in their communities.

One of the common reasons colleges and universities hire a consultant is to forestall or manage potential financial crisis. If higher education institutions were properly funded and responsibly managed, that could be avoided. A college education should be accessible to all students, and the AFT's Real Solutions for Higher Education campaign helps members fight for adequate state funding, transparent budgeting and shared governance that ensures educator voices and student needs are front and center in all decision-making.

This report aims to educate and empower local leaders to fight back against hiring consulting firms and the cuts and changes they often recommend. The report introduces some of the common players in higher education consulting, including Gray Decision Intelligence, Huron Consulting Group, rpk GROUP, and EAB, and their approaches and common recommendations. We include some of their known clients so that union leaders can reach out to other locals that have encountered a consulting firm. We also include financial information on individual contracts, where available, to show how much money is wasted. The report also outlines the critiques of each

¹ ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer, "College of Saint Rose," Form 990s, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/141338371/>, last updated December 22, 2025. Royall & Company was purchased by EAB in 2014 ("Royall & Co. to be Acquired for \$850M," *EdSurge*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2014-12-11-royall-co-to-be-acquired-for-850m>). Kathleen Moore, "Compensation for Top Brass Increased as Saint Rose Faced Closure," *Times Union*, July 17, 2024, <https://www.timesunion.com/education/article/saint-rose-faced-closure-administrators-19570480.php>.

² Eleanor J. Bader, "Colleges Say They're Cash-Strapped yet Pay Top Dollar for Anti-Union Consultants," *Truthout*, October 5, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/colleges-say-theyre-cash-strapped-yet-pay-top-dollar-for-anti-union-consultants/>.

³ Randi Weingarten, letter to West Virginia University Board of Governors, August 23, 2023, https://www.wboy.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/43/2023/08/Response_on_WVU_Budget_Cuts_August_2023.pdf.

of these firms and how to identify whether they are on your campus. Lastly, this report will present practical steps union and nonunion educators can take to push back against the hiring of a consulting firm and against the recommendations they may impose, using bargaining to protect staff and students, and enlisting student and community allies.

A note on sources: Some of the links in this paper are to publications and websites that require a subscription or registration. They may be available through the library or an online aggregator.

Consulting Firm Profiles

Numerous consulting firms promote their services to colleges and universities; this report focuses on the firms we know have been hired by institutions employing our members. There are other firms doing similar work, and, as this report shows, it is not always transparent that a consultant is behind the scenes. Regardless, the approaches described in the sections “How to Identify When Consultants Are on Campus” and “How/When to Push Back” would apply for those firms as well.

Gray Decision Intelligence

Overview

<https://www.graydi.us/>

Gray Decision Intelligence is a higher education consulting firm based in Boston. The company, formerly known as Gray Associates, was founded in 2002 by CEO Bob Atkins and specializes in compiling data to evaluate degree programs and trends. Gray DI provides software, data and a model for collaborative workshops to institutions that use the company’s Program Portfolio Strategy.⁴

Gray DI also sells clients a Program Evaluation System, which the company claims is the only platform with data that is specific to academic programs and reflects external markets as well as institutional performance.

Approach

The company collects and analyzes vast amounts of data. The title of Atkins’ book, *Start, Stop, or Grow: A Data-Informed Approach to Academic Program Evaluation and Management*, embodies the company’s approach. Implicit in the approach is the belief that the company’s data captures what is relevant and vital to university operations.

Some examples of Gray DI’s data-intensive approach are below.

- **Bradley University:** Bradley began a program prioritization process in 2019 with Gray DI, defining the process as using an iterative decision-making tool that assists in the allocation of university resources.⁵
- **D’Youville University:** Gray DI was engaged in 2019 to help the university analyze which programs to “start, stop, sustain, or grow.”⁶ On the apparent advice of Gray DI, D’Youville “paused” programs instead of outright cutting them, which meant the university did not need state approval to make the change—a tidy end-run around the controls imposed on the university.⁷
- **University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh:** The university hired Gray DI in December 2020. Using Gray DI’s data, UW-Oshkosh proposed creating a master’s program in biomedical engineering in 2023. The university argued that there was great student demand for such a program because Gray DI “reports 3,400 Google searches for ‘Bioengineering and/or Biomedical Engineering’ programs within a 100-mile radius of Oshkosh in the last 3 months, putting it in the 96th percentile of all academic programs.”⁸
- **University of Maine at Farmington:** During 2022, Gray DI noted that the university’s undergraduate psychology program had strong enrollment but also high instructional costs, calculated by Gray DI as “the sum of full-time and adjunct faculty salary, benefits, and additional pay plus the sum of department costs that have all been classified as instructional cost.” The consultant recommended that the program cut the equivalent of one full-time instructor.⁹

⁴ The company’s filings, name changes and history can be found at the Massachusetts Secretary of State website by entering Gray Associates into the business entity search (<https://corp.sec.state.ma.us/CorpWeb/CorpSearch/CorpSearch.aspx>) and choosing those headquartered in Concord.

⁵ Bradley University Senate, 2018-2019 meeting minutes, May 8, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240517214623/https://www.bradley.edu/academic/cio/senate/assets/docs/20182019/Agenda2019-05-08.pdf> (see p. 46, the Department of Sociology, Criminology & Social Work’s “Response to Proposed Program Prioritization Plan,” April 24, 2019, for a critique of Gray’s model).

⁶ Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, “Appendix 12.4 Policies: D’Youville 2020 Playbook,” pp. 228, 264, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221222155948/http://www.peqab.ca/Private/DYouville/12%20-%20Appendix%2012-4%20Policies%20and%20Procedures%20Organization%20Review%20pdfs.pdf>.

⁷ Bader, “Colleges Say They’re Cash-Strapped.”

⁸ University of Wisconsin Education Committee, meeting minutes, March 30, 2023, p. 53, [https://www.wisconsin.edu/regents/download/meeting_materials/2023_meeting_materials/Meeting-Book--Education-Committee-\(March-30-2023\).pdf](https://www.wisconsin.edu/regents/download/meeting_materials/2023_meeting_materials/Meeting-Book--Education-Committee-(March-30-2023).pdf); “Academic Affairs,” University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, <https://www.uwosh.edu/academic-affairs/>.

⁹ University of Maine at Farmington, “Personnel and Program Impact: UMF Budget Planning, FY 23-FY24,” 2022, www.maine.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1/2022/05/Personnel-and-Program-Impact-UMF-22-PDF.pdf.

- **Monroe Community College:** Monroe engaged Gray DI in June 2019. Gray DI’s recommendations included adding new programs, “deactivating” six programs and taking actions to grow other programs.¹⁰
- **Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education/Western Kentucky University:** The state engaged Gray DI to review academic programs at the state’s eight public universities and conduct “a revenue and cost analysis that calculates the marginal contribution of each program to campus finances.” In WKU’s copy of “Interpreting the Scorecard,” WKU reports it is using Gray DI’s data because CPE “requires it.”¹¹
- **Holyoke Community College:** HCC hired Gray DI in March 2019.¹² A year and a half later, the New England Commission of Higher Education reported that HCC eliminated 26 programs between 2010 and 2020, noting that many of the cuts “took place after a two-day workshop with Gray Associates consultants in August 2019.”¹³
- The D’Youville University faculty union, AAUP-AFT Local 6780, criticized Gray DI’s use of student surveys to predict degree demand: “On one hand, there is some legitimacy to knowing what students are interested in. But there is another large hand. When students come to college, they’re 17 or 18 years old and can’t possibly know what they’ll develop an interest in studying.”¹⁷
- A Bradley University academic department expressed the following concerns:¹⁸
 - » The factors Gray DI uses to judge demand, specifically Google searches and clicks, show a bias toward programs that high school students already know about.
 - » Measuring demand based on job posts is biased toward fields where most graduates can seek jobs with specific titles.
 - » Retention within a degree should not be as important as retaining the student within the university, even if the student changes majors.

Compensation/Costs

Although contract costs are not always available, we know that Gray DI has had six-figure annual contracts with several colleges and universities. Examples include:

- Wisconsin’s Western Technical College paid Gray DI at least \$200,000.¹⁴
- Kentucky State University’s three-year contract with Gray DI to identify programs with potential for growth cost \$128,787.15
- Stockton University extended a multiyear contract with Gray DI for \$209,000 for an additional year’s cost of \$119,560.¹⁶

Criticisms

Huron Consulting Group

Overview

<https://www.huronconsultinggroup.com/>

Based in Chicago, the Huron Consulting Group was founded in 2002 as a “financial and operational consulting business” by 25 former executives of Arthur Andersen, the accounting firm involved in the 2001 Enron scandal.¹⁹ Huron, ranked one of the fastest growing companies in 2008, had an accounting scandal of its own in 2009. The CEO, CFO and another executive resigned after the company was found to have overstated its profit by nearly 100 percent over a three-year period.²⁰

Huron is a publicly traded company that operates interna-

¹⁰ Monroe Community College Board of Trustees, meeting minutes, June 3, 2019, www.monroec.edu/fileadmin/SiteFiles/GeneralContent/depts/trustees/docs/2019/Minutes_BOT_6.3.2019.pdf.

¹¹ Gray Associates, “Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education Review of Academic Programs to Emphasize Jobs and Market Demand,” press release, *PR Newswire*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/kentucky-council-on-postsecondary-education-review-of-academic-programs-to-emphasize-jobs-and-market-demand-301183000.html>; Western Kentucky University, “Interpreting the Gray Data Scorecard,” December 1, 2020, www.wku.edu/academicaffairs/documents/interpreting_scorecard.pdf.

¹² Holyoke Community College, “Winning Bids of Public Contracts,” November 15, 2019, [www.hcc.edu/media/documents/About/Public%20Records/Holyoke%20Community%20College%20List%20of%20Bid%20Numbers%20FY%2017%2018%2019%20and%2020\(0\).pdf](http://www.hcc.edu/media/documents/About/Public%20Records/Holyoke%20Community%20College%20List%20of%20Bid%20Numbers%20FY%2017%2018%2019%20and%2020(0).pdf).

¹³ Evaluation Team for New England Commission of Higher Education, “Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students of Holyoke Community College,” Holyoke Community College, October 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240903131318/https://www.hcc.edu/Documents/About/Accreditation/Holyoke%20Community%20College%20Report.pdf>.

¹⁴ Western Technical College District Board, meeting minutes, October 15, 2024, https://www.westerntc.edu/sites/default/files/about/board/2024-2025/Oct/10-15-24_Board_Packet.pdf.

¹⁵ Kentucky Legislature, “Personal Service Contract Amendment List-September 2024,” <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/moreinfo/contracts/2004%20Keifer%20Data%20Base/PSC%20Amendments/240900.pdf>.

¹⁶ Stockton University Board of Trustees, meeting agenda, June 27, 2024, https://stockton.edu/board-of-trustees/documents/OS_6-27-24v3.pdf; Stockton University Board of Trustees, meeting minutes, June 27, 2024, <https://stockton.edu/board-of-trustees/documents/Minutes-OS-6-27-24.pdf>.

¹⁷ Bader, “Colleges Say They’re Cash-Strapped.”

¹⁸ Bradley University Senate, 2018-2019 meeting minutes, p. 46, the Department of Sociology, Criminology & Social Work’s “Response to Proposed Program Prioritization Plan.”

¹⁹ Jaskiran Dhillon, Cinzia Arruzza and AAUP-TNS Media Collective, “Corporate Consultants Set Their Targets on American Universities,” *The Nation*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/new-school-huron/>; Nick Zieminski, “In Huron Scandal, Shadows of Arthur Andersen,” *Reuters*, August 3, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-huron-andersen/in-huron-scandal-shadows-of-arthur-andersen-idUSTRE57262D20090803/>; Steve Gelsi, “Huron Consulting IPO Takes Flight,” *Market Watch*, October 13, 2004, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/huron-consulting-ipo-takes-flight>.

²⁰ Sweta Singh, “Huron CEO, CFO Quit as Restatements Slash Profits,” *Reuters*, August 1, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/legal/government/corrected-update-2-huron-ceo-cfo-quit-as-restatements-slash-profits-idUSBNG498434/>.

tionally. According to an SEC filing reviewed in March 2024, index fund managers own nearly 27 percent of the company's shares. Huron's 12 directors and executives combined own 2.2 percent.²¹ The California State Teachers' Retirement System, a pension plan for K-12 educators, has a small investment in Huron, and other pension plans may hold shares as well.²²

Huron's business is divided into three segments: healthcare, commercial and education. The education segment includes public and private colleges and universities, academic medical centers, research institutions and other nonprofit organizations. For fiscal year 2024, 51 percent of Huron's revenues came from healthcare and 32 percent from education. As of December 2024, Huron had \$1.3 billion in total assets and total liabilities of about \$782 million. After a drop in income and some restructuring in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, revenues have since recovered and increased to \$1.5 billion in 2024, with net income of nearly \$117 million. The company had more than 7,000 employees around the world as of December 2023.²³

Approach

Huron provides consulting and managed services and digital capabilities, and, for colleges and universities, offers expertise in Salesforce and similar platforms. The company's website²⁴ advises colleges and universities to adopt a business focus through:

- Academic portfolio optimization—that is, weighing the costs and revenues offered by course offerings;
- Its proprietary “Research Suite,” which is designed to improve administrative services and ensure compliance;
- Partnerships and shared service agreements with companies or other colleges and universities (referred to as “revenue-driving partnerships”), particularly for institutions struggling with enrollment or finances;
- Online courses, shorter degree programs, and certifications, collectively labeled “education delivery innovation”; and

- Tuition costs differentiated based on the costs of instruction or graduates' prospective earnings.

Huron also has suggested a redesign of the higher education labor model to “create efficiencies” by dividing the work of faculty among other staff.²⁵

Some examples of Huron's work are below.

- **University of Wisconsin:** In 2017, Huron was hired by the University of Wisconsin to manage a state-driven austerity plan. According to an article in *The Nation*: “In addition to laying off 100 employees, reducing employment for non-tenure-track staff, and forcibly reassigning tenured faculty, Huron's plan shuttered thriving programs in humanities and social sciences and drove mass faculty layoffs at the university's Stevens Point Campus.”²⁶ The UW system also hired Huron (and Accenture) in 2009 to consolidate the payroll systems of the UW system. The budget for that project was \$81.4 million, 55 percent of which would go to consultants expected to do about 40 percent of the work. The consultants billed up to \$342 per hour in the first five months, with four employees billing “more than \$200,000 apiece.”²⁷
- **University of New Hampshire:** In 2019, UNH paid Huron \$600,000 to produce an analysis that Huron claimed would save the university \$12 million over two years. An article in *The Nation* noted that “the solutions proposed in the report included cuts to research and libraries, layoffs of facility and maintenance staff, and adjustments to the faculty mix (the combination of tenure track and untenured positions) based on a merely quantitative criterion for cost efficiency, credit hour production (CHP) per faculty member.”²⁸
- **The New School:** TNS hired Huron in 2020 to address potential budget deficits. Five months later, the board of trustees voted to lay off 122 employees. The university also eliminated 80 open positions.²⁹ According to the union, “the layoffs made minimal difference to the budget shortfall: In fact, they are only meant to result in annual savings of \$12 million, starting from the fiscal year 2020.”³⁰

²¹ “Profile: Huron Consulting Group Inc.,” *Yahoo Finance*, <https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/HURN/profile/>.

²² California State Teachers' Retirement System, “Portfolio Holdings: Domestic Equities,” as of June 30, 2025, CalSTRS, <https://www.calstrs.com/portfolio-holdings-domestic-equities>.

²³ U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Huron's 2024 Form 10-K filing, <https://www.sec.gov/ix?doc=/Archives/edgar/data/0001289848/000128984825000032/hurn-20241231.htm>.

²⁴ Peter Stokes and Andrew Laws, “Building Higher Education's Future Business Model,” Huron, https://www.huronconsultinggroup.com/insights/building-higher-education-future-business-model#Laying_the_Groundwork_for_a_Viable_Future_830243A11464CF997C66A2424581517.

²⁵ Blumenstyk, “Tough Times for Colleges.”

²⁶ Dhillon et al., “Corporate Consultants.”

²⁷ Pioneer Press, “UW System / Consulting Firm's Charges for Payroll Project Raise Eyebrows,” *Pioneer Press*, July 16, 2009, updated November 12, 2015, <https://www.twincities.com/2009/07/16/uw-system-consulting-firms-charges-for-payroll-project-raise-eyebrows/>; Pioneer Press, “New UW Payroll System Will Cost \$81.4 Million,” *Pioneer Press*, September 2, 2009, updated November 12, 2015, <https://www.twincities.com/2009/09/02/new-uw-payroll-system-will-cost-81-4-million/>.

²⁸ Dhillon et al., “Corporate Consultants.”

²⁹ Ginia Bellafante, “This School Was Built for Idealists. It Could Use Some Rich Alumni,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/nyregion/new-school-nyc-endowment-layoffs.html>.

³⁰ Dhillon et al., “Corporate Consultants.”

- **University of Vermont:** To fix the human resources and financial management systems, UVM Vice President for Finance and Administration J. Michael Gower signed multiple contracts with Huron, each of which exceeded \$250,000, in violation of UVM’s requirement to obtain approval from the board of trustees and president. The error was exposed in 2008, and Gower resigned after an internal investigation determined that Gower’s office was responsible for the violations. Despite the financial mismanagement, UVM continued to hire Huron for other projects. For example, in 2022, UVM awarded Huron a five-year contract extension for research administrative software for up to \$2.2 million. Rutgers University, another Huron client, later hired Gower as chief financial officer in September 2013.³¹
- **Rutgers University:** Rutgers implemented the Cornerstone project in 2015, which was an overhaul of all business processes and technology at the university (including human resources, accounting and procurement). Huron and Deloitte were the consultants on the project.³² The project became a flash point for the Union of Rutgers Administrators for the repeated failures of the overhaul, such as delays in reimbursements.³³ The faculty senate reported that “Huron was the chosen provider of numerous problematic software packages that are mandated for use by Rutgers employees.” Further, the faculty senate reported that Rutgers’ former chief ethics, audit & compliance officer, who previously worked for Huron, “authorized funding of a Huron project that was flagged twice for violation of Rutgers policy.”³⁴
- **University of Minnesota:** In 2020, UMN contracted with Huron and KPMG. Huron was hired for the PEAK Initiative (Positioned for Excellence, Alignment and Knowledge), a systemwide effort to make university administration more efficient. Huron conducted an

assessment in 2021, then drafted “service catalogs, business processes, and [outlined] key services and expectations” in 2022. The board of regents authorized an additional \$2.65 million for Huron for Phase 2 of the project, from February to October 2024. Faculty and student workers confronted the regents, arguing that the regents were spending money on the Huron contract and ignoring the Legislature’s recommendation to reduce excessive administration costs while, at the same time, proposing program cuts and changes to working conditions.³⁵

- **University of Maryland:** UMD hired Huron to conduct a 10-year strategic plan for the UMD system in 2021. The UMD AAUP chapter wrote to the provost criticizing the decision to hire Huron, the administration-selected steering committee (which failed to represent the views of faculty, staff and students), and the lack of transparency about how the plan would be implemented.³⁶
- **Bloomfield College:** After hiring Huron to explore financial sustainability options in 2023-24, Bloomfield merged with Montclair State University.³⁷ The AFT/AAUP chapter negotiated impact bargaining.

Compensation/Costs

Contract costs are not always publicly disclosed. Here are examples discovered through information requests and other online records:

- Madison-based radio station WORT submitted a series of information requests to University of Wisconsin campuses and received contracts showing that Huron had received at least \$51 million from the UW system between 2019 and 2023.³⁸ One Huron consultant billed UW more than \$4,100 for 12 hours of work, a rate of more than \$340 per hour.

³¹ “Trustees Find \$14 Million, Work for More Secure Financial Future,” *The Vermont Cynic*, September 15, 2008, <https://vtcynic.com/news/trustees-find-14-million-work-for-more-secure-financial-future/>; “In-depth Look: Reports Show Rutgers’s New CFO Hails From History of Controversies,” *Muckgers*, October 1, 2013, <https://muckgers.com/in-depth-look-reports-show-rutgers-new-cfo-hails-from-history-of-controversies-6f327a18a60b/>; University of Vermont and State Agricultural College Board of Trustees Executive Committee, meeting minutes, August 8, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20240728042347/https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/UVM-Board-of-Trustees/committees/exec/minutes_2022-08-08.pdf#gsc.tab=0.

³² Deloitte worked on the project before Huron began its work. Rutgers Senate Budget and Finance Committee, “Senate Charge S-2308.”

³³ “Cornerstone: Good? Bad? Ugly?” University of Rutgers Administrators-AFT, November 11, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210919204051/http://www.ura-aft.org/2016/11/11/cornerstone-good-bad-ugly/>; “Cornerstone Survey Workload Responses,” University of Rutgers Administrators-AFT, accessed May 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220524155144/http://www.ura-aft.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/CornerstoneSurveyWorkloadResponses.pdf>.

³⁴ Rutgers University Senate Budget and Finance Committee, “Senate Charge S-2308, Conflict of Interest Declarations,” April 6, 2024, <https://senate.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/S-2308-Conflict-of-Interest-Declarations-FINAL-APPROVED.pdf>.

³⁵ University of Minnesota Board of Regents, meeting minutes, March 8, 2024, <https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/2024-03/docket-bor-mar2024-v2.pdf>; “Minnesota Students, Workers, and Faculty Rally Against Bloated University Administration,” *Fight Back News*, May 14, 2023, <https://fightbacknews.org/articles/minnesota-students-workers-and-faculty-rally-against-bloated-university-administration>.

³⁶ United Academics of Maryland-AAUP Executive Committee, “UMD AAUP Concerned about Elements of University’s Ten-year Strategic Planning Process,” letter to UMD provost, October 11, 2021, <https://uamumd.org/umdaaup-concerned-about-elements-of-universitys-ten-year-strategic-planning-process/>. Planning documents for Huron’s engagement are here: Huron Consulting Group, “BOR Strategic Planning Work Group #2: Baseline the Current State and Align on the Future Environment,” University System of Maryland, March 11, 2020, <https://www.usmd.edu/strategic-plan/Huron-USM-BOR-Strategic-Planning-Presentation-20210311.pdf>; Huron, “USM Strategic Planning: External Scan, Phase II: Blueprint the Future State,” University System of Maryland, April 22, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20240926053711/https://www.usmd.edu/strategic-plan/External_Scan.pdf/.

³⁷ Robert Spencer and Peter Stokes, “Institutional Merger Enables College to Continue Serving Its Highly Diverse Community,” Huron, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://www.huronconsultinggroup.com/insights/bloomfield-college-forges-new-path>.

³⁸ Sara Gabler and WORT News Department, “UW System Spends Millions on Consultants,” WORT FM, December 12, 2024, <https://www.wortfm.org/uw-system-spends-millions-on-consultants/>.

- After signing contracts with Huron for approximately \$5 million, the University of Vermont ended up paying \$10.8 million for one project prior to 2013.³⁹
- An hourly rate sheet from 2021 for Florida International University indicated the Huron employees' rates ranged from \$195 for an analyst to \$360 for a project manager.⁴⁰

Criticisms

Huron's recommendations are focused on metrics that oversimplify higher education. For example, Huron recommends using credit hour production, which is based on the total number of credit hours in a semester and student enrollment, to evaluate faculty. Such a narrow approach would seem to define an advanced seminar for juniors and seniors as less productive than a large first-year sociology class, without regard to whether and how students learn.

Peter Stokes, managing director of Huron's Higher Education Practice, has said he is "particularly fascinated by how faculty roles might be unbundled" so that the work of designing, teaching and evaluating a course is separated. Such an approach could reduce or distort the scope of higher education instruction.

Huron released a report comparing the COVID-19 pandemic to the crisis after Hurricane Katrina titled "COVID-19 and Hurricane Katrina: Parallels and Lessons Learned."⁴¹ In the report, Huron advocated "that universities immediately institute aggressive measures such as staff and faculty layoffs, program closures, salary reductions, and hiring freezes," which, as *The Nation* noted, ignored the fact that post-Katrina reforms had "exacerbated racialized dispossession."⁴²

rpk GROUP

Overview

<https://rpkgroup.com/>

In 2011, Rick Staisloff, a former Maryland state employee, founded rpk GROUP LLC. Headquartered in Annapolis, Md., rpk GROUP emphasizes the use of data in budgeting and program evaluation. Its trademarked approach to fiscal evaluation, Mission, Market, and Margin, is designed to help

institutions of higher education save money while upholding their mission. In the post-pandemic landscape, rpk GROUP expanded its focus, offering its strategic platform as a way to avoid across-the-board cuts by re-evaluating academic portfolios, curriculums and other university structures through what the company calls a "strategic finance lens."

Approach

Some examples of rpk GROUP's approach are below:

- For an August 2014 article, Staisloff described a model for higher education focused on increasing marginal returns, emphasizing that the focus should not be only on spending less but also on "get[ting] more for the money that we already spend."⁴³
- Staisloff released a set of resource videos on "strategic finance" in August 2020, including one with University of Kansas Provost Barbara Bichelmeyer in which they discussed how the university purportedly "engaged faculty" in developing a new business model.⁴⁴ Less than a year later, the campus newspaper reported that the KU faculty senate had passed a resolution that "criticized [Chancellor Douglas] Girod and Bichelmeyer for not meaningfully engaging with faculty, staff and students in dealing with" a budget shortfall.⁴⁵
- In a January 2019 report, Staisloff and rpk GROUP senior associate Donna M. Desrochers encouraged higher education leaders to focus on return on investment. The report advises decision-makers to use "data and metrics to identify cost drivers and shift levers to reduce costs and/or improve efficiencies."⁴⁶
- Staisloff suggests that institutions view program closures in terms of sustainability by asking themselves: "Who wants this? What's our success with the students who go into those programs? And how does it help us create an overall sustainable business model?"⁴⁷
- Staisloff co-wrote an article titled "Moving to Offense: A New Playbook for Confronting Budget Shortfalls," which lays out rpk's vision of shifting higher education institu-

³⁹ "Reports Show Rutgers's New CFO," *Muckers*.

⁴⁰ Florida International University Controller, "Huron Consulting Group Inc. Price Rate Sheet," Florida International University, 2021, <https://controller.fiu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PUR-03303HuronConsultingPriceSheet.pdf>

⁴¹ Chris Byrne and Chris Powers, "COVID-19 and Hurricane Katrina: Parallels and Lessons Learned," Huron Consulting Group, 2020, <https://www.scribd.com/document/584155068/COVID-19-and-Hurricane-Katrina>

⁴² Dhillon et al., "Corporate Consultants."

⁴³ Don Troop, "New Role for College Business Officers: Selling Change," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 1, 2012, p. A8, <https://library.iliauni.edu.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/August-1-2014.-Volume-LX-Number-43.pdf>

⁴⁴ "Focus on Strategic Finance with a Suite of Resources from Expert Rick Staisloff," American Council on Education, August 10, 2020, <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Focus-on-Strategic-Finance-With-a-Suite-of-Resources-from-Expert-Rick-Staisloff.aspx>

⁴⁵ Blake Ullmann, "Faculty Senate Passes 'Lack of Confidence' Resolution," *University Daily Kansan*, May 5, 2021, https://www.kansan.com/news/faculty-senate-passes-lack-of-confidence-resolution/article_c1a68a6e-ad4e-11eb-89dd-8770698fdcd1.html

⁴⁶ Donna M. Desrochers and Richard L. Staisloff, "Improving College Affordability with New Higher Education Business Models," rpk GROUP, January 2019, https://rpkgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/rpk-GROUP-Improving-College-Affordability-with-New-Business-Models_Final_for_Release-HR.pdf

⁴⁷ Katherine Mangan, "Easing the Pain of Program Closings," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 12, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/easing-the-pain-of-program-closings/?sra=true>

tions away from what it sees as unproductive cuts to one where the institutions are answering “strategic questions about the organization’s future.” This includes determining “the cost and net revenues of existing academic portfolios and services” as well as developing a “strategic platform to guide resource allocation” and prioritizing long-term solutions over short-term fixes.⁴⁸

- In an article in *The Hechinger Report*, rpk GROUP’s Desrochers said that higher education institutions should “calculate faculty efficiency by student credit hours—the number of students multiplied by the number of courses taught and the number of credits per course” in order to prioritize what she calls the “fill rate” of classes.⁴⁹
- **Utica University:** The university began partnering with rpk GROUP to conduct an academic portfolio review in 2017-18. Four years later, Utica President Laura Casamento and rpk’s Rick Staisloff co-presented a session on Utica’s “return on investment lens,” suggesting rpk’s relationship with Utica had continued.⁵⁰ The university announced in February 2023 that 15 programs would be cut (two programs were later reinstated).⁵¹
- **University of Missouri-Kansas City:** Rpk GROUP advised UMKC in 2017 on changes to methodology to calculate student credit hours that included “determining a cost per credit hour for each course.”⁵² In addition, rpk worked with the office of the provost on an administrative services review in 2019. The review, “under the direction of rpk GROUP,” targeted administrative and academic services and focused, in part, on lowering costs.
- **University of Kansas:** Rpk GROUP consulted shortly after the university’s CFO retired in 2020.⁵³ For \$710,000, rpk also produced an “academic portfolio” report that analyzed the university’s curriculum and finances.⁵⁴ The result was a university proposal to eliminate 42 aca-

dem programs in 2022. The faculty fought the cuts and saved some of the programs.⁵⁵

- **Anne Arundel Community College:** Rpk GROUP worked with AACC as part of an academic portfolio and academic resource review that launched in August 2022. Its stated goal is to overhaul the curriculum and the college’s expenditures. The review includes an assessment of the college’s tenure process that likely would weaken tenure or prevent its expansion.⁵⁶
- **New Jersey City University:** In 2021, NJCU, a minority-serving institution, hired rpk GROUP to address the university’s increasing deficit and declining enrollment. Members of AFT Local 1839 spoke up against the partnership at a board of trustees meeting, raising questions about how much the university was spending on the partnership and potential cuts that could drive students to enroll elsewhere and increase the decline in enrollment. A professor of sociology raised further questions about rpk’s methodology, saying it was “severely limited and fundamentally flawed.” The consultants had told the professor that their exclusive use of quantitative data meant, as rpk GROUP acknowledged, the analysis would not consider the “quality of academic programs” or the obstacles students face as they pursue their degrees. NJCU decided to eliminate 48 undergraduate programs (including economics, physics, art and teacher education), 28 graduate programs, 20 certificate programs and 24 undergraduate minors, which meant the loss of 30 tenured and 19 untenured faculty. It later backtracked on the decision to end nursing, English as a second language, and early childhood education programs after interim university President Andrés Acebo called these programs “gateways to middle-class, economic-mobility-driven jobs.”⁵⁷
- **SUNY Erie Community College:** In 2021, SUNY ECC hired rpk GROUP to examine ways to improve the performance of the college system. One significant sugges-

⁴⁸ Tammy Kolbe and Rick Staisloff, “Moving to Offense: A New Playbook for Confronting Budget Shortfalls,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/08/06/new-playbook-confronting-higher-education%E2%80%99s-looming-budget-shortfalls-opinion>.

⁴⁹ Jon Marcus, “Some Universities’ Response to Budget Woes: Making Faculty Teach More Courses,” *The Hechinger Report*, April 30, 2021, <https://hechingerreport.org/some-universities-response-to-budget-woes-making-faculty-teach-more-courses/>.

⁵⁰ Utica College, “2017-2018 Institutional Priorities,” <https://www.utica.edu/college/plan/2017-2018%20Institutional%20Priorities%20and%20Divisional%20Goals.pdf>; Rpk GROUP, “Strategic Finance Learning Studio with Laura Casamento, President, Utica College,” August 3, 2020, <https://rpkgroup.com/strategic-finance-learning-studio-laura-casamento/>.

⁵¹ Bader, “Colleges Say They’re Cash-Strapped.”

⁵² UMKC Faculty Senate Budget Committee, “Credit Hours,” February 22, 2017, https://www.umkc.edu/facultysenate/committees/fsbc_docs/022217/022217_Credit_hours.pdf; Office of the Provost, “Initiatives,” University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190712164659/http://www.umkc.edu/provost/initiatives/default.asp>.

⁵³ Douglas A. Girod, “Announcing the Retirement of a Senior Leadership Team Member,” University of Kansas Office of the Chancellor, May 26, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210614124032/https://chancellor.ku.edu/news/2020/may26>.

⁵⁴ Conner Mitchell, “The 9 Month, \$710K Consulting Contract that Could Alter How KU Operates,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 18, 2020, <https://www2.ljworld.com/news/ku/2020/oct/18/the-9-month-710k-consulting-contract-that-could-alter-how-ku-operates/>.

⁵⁵ Josh Moody, “University of Kansas Looks to Cut 42 Academic Programs,” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/02/18/university-kansas-plans-cut-42-academic-programs>.

⁵⁶ “Academic Portfolio Review, Academic Resource Review and Tenure Expansion Assessment,” Anne Arundel Community College, <https://www.aacc.edu/about/mission-and-vision/strategic-plan/academic-review/>.

⁵⁷ Bader, “Colleges Say They’re Cash-Strapped”; Mary Ann Koruth, “Facing Job and Program Cuts, New Jersey City University Seeks More State Aid,” *NorthJersey.com*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/education/2023/02/21/facing-job-cuts-new-jersey-city-university-seeks-more-state-aid/69925083007/>; Haresh Oudharnine, “Anxiety Looms over NJCU Professors: Concerns About Impact from External Consultants,” *Gothic Times*, April 29, 2021, <https://gothictimes.net/11190/showcase/anxiety-looms-over-njcu-professors/>.

tion was for the system, which had three separate colleges—in Amherst, Buffalo and Orchard Park—to operate as a single institution with shared administration and staff between them. The rpk report also suggested the system cut those programs with fewer than 30 students enrolled over a three-year average and that have declining or single-digit growth, or that produce fewer than 10 degrees per year.⁵⁸

- **West Virginia University:** After WVU hired rpk GROUP in 2023 to conduct an academic optimization review to address a budget deficit, the university proposed eliminating 32 programs. In fighting the cuts, the union cited a huge increase in spending on administrators, added debt for facilities and the athletics budget.⁵⁹
- **St. John's University (New York):** The university hired rpk GROUP during the 2020-21 academic year to review the university's operations. The result of that review was a decision in August 2022 to close the Staten Island campus. Although the university was ultimately responsible for the closure decision, its explanation of the closure pointed to a recommendation from rpk GROUP.⁶⁰

Compensation/Costs

Some examples of what rpk charges, from news reporting and other public documents:

- West Virginia University's contract in 2023 called for WVU to pay rpk GROUP as much as \$875,000 for nine months' work; the hourly rate for one rpk GROUP staffer was \$500.⁶¹
- At the University of Kansas, rpk produced an "academic portfolio" report that analyzed the university's curriculum and finances for an estimated \$710,000.⁶²

Criticisms

Because rpk GROUP has a narrow focus on return on investment, its recommendations have led to significant program closures at numerous client institutions, including West Virginia University, Utica University and University of Kansas. It also recommended closures of whole campuses at St. John's University in New York and SUNY Erie Community

College, which would be disruptive to those communities.

When rpk GROUP works with clients considering program cuts and other changes, input from faculty and staff seems to have been ignored. Shortly after Staisloff highlighted the University of Kansas provost for engaging faculty in the process, the faculty senate passed a resolution expressing no confidence in the provost.

EAB

Overview

<https://eab.com/>

EAB, originally called Education Advisory Board, evolved from a team at The Advisory Board Company that primarily worked in healthcare. In 2007, it began focusing on large universities and academic medical centers.

Over the years, EAB's corporate changes include acquisitions of other companies and investments from private equity firms. In 2014, EAB's parent company paid \$850 million to acquire Richmond-based Royall & Company, founded by Bill Royall.⁶³ Acquiring Royall increased the company's portfolio to a total of 950 colleges and universities, and was expected to bring increased capability in areas such as financial aid optimization, alumni fundraising, raising institutions' national profiles, increasing revenue, and on-time graduation rates.⁶⁴

In 2017, the Advisory Board sold EAB to private equity firm Vista Equity Partners for \$1.55 million.⁶⁵ BC Partners joined as an EAB investor in May 2021 with undisclosed financial terms.⁶⁶

Vista has been involved in a tax evasion scandal and a security breach of educators' and students' data. In 2020, federal authorities found that Robert Smith, Vista's then-CEO and current managing director, had evaded taxes on more than \$200 million in income earned from Vista. The tax evasion involved not only Smith but also Robert Brockman, one of Vista's founding investors, who the Department of Justice alleged was responsible for a "two billion dollar tax evasion scheme."⁶⁷

Approach

EAB has acquired many companies and offers clients a range of products and services. The premise of EAB's approach is

⁵⁸ Editorial Board, "New Study Clearly Shows that ECC Must Act Quickly to Deal with Its Weaknesses," *Buffalo News*, May 12, 2022, updated June 15, 2022, https://buffalonews.com/opinion/editorial/the-editorial-board-new-study-clearly-shows-that-ecc-must-act-quickly-to-deal-with/article_f7d4028e-d20f-11ec-b475-0719a09299be.html.

⁵⁹ Bader, "Colleges Say They're Cash-Strapped."

⁶⁰ "Staten Island Teach-Out," St. John's University, October 12, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230601131949/https://www.stjohns.edu/staten-island-campus/staten-island-teach-out>.

⁶¹ West Virginia University, contract with rpk GROUP, April 18, 2023, <https://transformation.wvu.edu/files/d/c25b20f3-cf7a-43b0-a4aa-1fe7cca3ace7/rpk-contract.pdf>.

⁶² Mitchell, "9 Month, \$710K Consulting Contract."

⁶³ "Royall & Co. to Be Acquired for \$850M," *EdSurge*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2014-12-11-royall-co-to-be-acquired-for-850m>.

⁶⁴ The Advisory Board Company, "The Advisory Board Company to Acquire Royall & Company, Extending Unique and Powerful Business Model Further into Higher Education," press release, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, December 10, 2014, <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1157377/000119312514438954/d836556dex99.htm>.

⁶⁵ "Vista Equity Partners—Overview," Prequin, <https://pro.prequin.com/fundManager/11324>, accessed January 30, 2026. Related to the purchase, the rest of The Advisory Board Company was merged with Optum/UnitedHealth Group: "Vista's Portfolio," Vista Equity Partners, <https://www.vistaequitypartners.com/about/companies/>.

⁶⁶ "BC Partners—Overview," Prequin, <https://pro.prequin.com/fundManager/96>, accessed January 30, 2026.

⁶⁷ Office of Public Affairs, "CEO of Multibillion-Dollar Software Company Indicted for Decades-long Tax Evasion and Wire Fraud Schemes," press release, U.S. Department of Justice, October 15, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/ceo-multibillion-dollar-software-company-indicted-decades-long-tax-evasion-and-wire-fraud>.

that, by amassing vast amounts of data on all aspects of higher education, the company can help students and institutions meet the challenges they face. Its products and services include software that analyzes institutional data; recruitment and enrollment tools; software that tracks students' academic progress; a service that uses technology to create a plan to improve student retention; and an online platform for enrollment recommendations.

Some examples of EAB's approach are below:

- **William Paterson University:** The university used EAB's Navigate360 software for enrollment and student retention. EAB also conducted a market analysis for "New Nondegree Undergraduate-Level Program Opportunities" in May 2023.⁶⁸
- **Miami University (Ohio):** Miami used "EAB's research services to provide academic program benchmarking, market opportunity scans, and market analysis for appropriate programs" for its Academic Program Evaluation, Improvement and Prioritization project, which began in 2019. (The university also employed Gray Decision Intelligence).⁶⁹
- **The College of Saint Rose:** The College of Saint Rose in New York hired EAB for at least eight years for "student search services" to recruit students and boost enrollment. It paid EAB (and its affiliate Royall & Company) a total of \$6.4 million. As "enrollment plummeted 36 percent from a high of 4,004 students in 2019 to 2,566 students in 2023," the board announced in December 2023 that the college would close.⁷⁰
- **University of Kentucky and University of Louisville:** UK and UofL had or were pursuing contracts with EAB prior to 2021.⁷¹ Louisville also contracts for the use of CardSmart, the EAB platform to get academic advising

and progress reports.⁷²

- Pikes Peak Community College and two other Colorado colleges led a pilot in 2018-19 for all Colorado community colleges to transition to EAB's software systems.⁷³

Compensation/Costs

Publicly available contracts and media coverage provide some data on how much colleges and universities pay for EAB's services.

- Winthrop University has a \$370,000 contract with EAB for student enrollment services for five years at a cost of \$1.8 million.⁷⁴
- East Tennessee State University paid EAB more than \$1 million for a four-year contract for Navigate360 for about 10,000 students, and Texas State University paid EAB more than \$2 million for a similar product for a five-year period for about 34,000 students.⁷⁵
- East Stroudsburg University paid EAB \$269,990 for student recruitment services during the 2018-19 academic year.⁷⁶

Criticisms

EAB's company history says Royall "reimagined student recruitment marketing," yet Bill Royall's "snap app," a college application pre-filled with the student's basic information, was critiqued for driving up application numbers but not leading to higher enrollment.⁷⁷ Advisory Board Chair and CEO Robert Musslewhite said that, post-merger, EAB would be able to help higher education institutions "enroll the right students" and achieve "highly recurring revenues and strong bottom line performance."⁷⁸

Vista Equity owns a suite of education technology companies in higher education and K-12 education, giving it a wealth of student data.⁷⁹

⁶⁸ "Improving Student Engagement and Retention with Navigate360: A Seamless Platform Transition Drives Impressive Results at William Paterson University," EAB, August 22, 2024, <https://eab.com/why-eab/partner-stories/improving-student-engagement-and-retention-with-navigate360/>; "New Nondegree Undergraduate-Level Program Opportunities: William Paterson University," EAB, May 2023, https://www.wpunj.edu/provost/assets/EAB_New%20Nondegree%20Undergraduate-Level%20Program%20Opportunities_Market%20Opportunity%20Scan%20Completed%20for%20William%20Paterson%20University.pdf; "Attracting Today's Learners and Offering In-Demand Programs," EAB, May 23, 2023, https://www.wpunj.edu/provost/assets/Blueprint%20for%20Growth_William%20Paterson_FINAL.pdf.

⁶⁹ "Academic Prioritization," Miami University, accessed January 30, 2026, https://miamioh.edu/academic-affairs/admin-affairs/acad_prioritization/index.html.

⁷⁰ ProPublica, "College of Saint Rose," Form 990s. The college paid Royall for student search services and paid EAB for "professional services"; they are listed as contractors in the Form 990s for fiscal years 2014-15 through 2022-23, except for the year 2021-22. Royall was purchased by EAB in 2014. Moore, "Compensation for Top Brass."

⁷¹ Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, meeting minutes, April 16, 2021, p. 47, https://cpe.ky.gov/aboutus/records/cpe_meetings/agenda-2021-04-16.pdf.

⁷² "Student Services: Advising Appointments in CardSmart," University of Louisville, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://louisville.campus.eab.com/>.

⁷³ Mt. San Antonio College, "Pikes Peak Community College," meeting minutes, November 2018, https://www.mtsac.edu/president/cabinet-notes/2018-19/Pikes_Peak_Agenda.pdf.

⁷⁴ South Carolina State Fiscal Accountability Authority, "Intent to Award," September 16, 2022, https://apps.sceis.sc.gov/SCContractWeb/attachmentDisplay.do?attachname=ITA.docx&objecttype=BBP_P_DOC&objectyr=00&objectno=005056AC75401EED8D8773E9FB1FCC25&attachType=DOCX.

⁷⁵ East Tennessee State University, contract with EAB Global, dated March 2024, *MuckRock*, <https://www.muckrock.com/foi/file/1262211/embed/>.

⁷⁶ East Stroudsburg University, contract with EAB Global, dated July 25, 2018, Pennsylvania Treasury, <https://contracts.patresury.gov/View.aspx?ContractID=454299>.

⁷⁷ Jim Jump, "Remembering Bill Royall," Thoughtful College Search, July 10, 2020, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://www.thoughtfulcollegesearch.com/ethicalcolletheadmissions/2020/7/10/remembering-bill-royall>.

⁷⁸ Advisory Board Company, "Advisory Board Company to Acquire Royall"; Royall & Co. to Be Acquired," *EdSurge*; EAB, "About Us," <https://eab.com/about/>; Roger Riddell, "Advisory Board Moves into Higher Ed with \$850M Royall & Company Acquisition," *Higher Ed Dive*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/advisory-board-moves-into-higher-ed-with-850m-royall-company-acquisition/342891/>.

⁷⁹ "Vista's Portfolio," Vista Equity Partners.

- Vista bought PowerSchool from Pearson in 2015.⁸⁰ EAB and PowerSchool partnered in 2023 to share data and “provide high school students easy access to proactive offers of college admission and financial aid” by incorporating EAB’s Concourse into PowerSchool’s Naviance.⁸¹ Two years later, PowerSchool disclosed that a security breach had exposed sensitive information of more than 60 million students and 9 million teachers in the U.S. and Canada.⁸² The information included Social Security numbers, parents’ contact information, physicians’ names, and grades.
- Vista bought Ellucian in 2021, which has “cloud-ready technology” in 50 countries. Ellucian’s Banner software is similar to EAB’s offerings. Ellucian then acquired CampusLogic, student financial aid software, in 2022.⁸³

In an article titled “The Student Recruitment Industrial Complex,” Rob Wolfe of the *Washington Monthly* wrote: “If it achieves monopoly power over list data, the private equity-owned EAB will gain even more leverage to force schools to buy expensive software and consulting services that they don’t necessarily need.”⁸⁴

Other Consulting Firms

Other firms and individual consultants, such as Drumm McNaughton (CEO of The Change Leader, Inc.⁸⁵) and RNL,⁸⁶ also work in higher ed and may appear on campus. And some of the large consulting firms have higher education practices: Bain, Accenture, McKinsey, Deloitte and EY have all had higher education clients and offered strategic and financial services.

EY, formerly known as Ernst & Young, “upped its profile in the higher-education market in September [2014] by acquiring the Parthenon Group, a 300-person firm that had long been known for its work in international and for-profit higher education.” EY had been expanding its activity in the “non-profit- and public-college sectors, advising on such matters as whether and how the institutions should go online, how to attract international students, and how to better engage with potential employers of their students.”⁸⁷

Between 2012 and 2014, Deloitte doubled the number of consultants it had working in higher education to 200. It expanded its footprint in higher ed in 2016 when it purchased Entigence, technology to “help universities improve their use of data analytics, enabling quicker, more-informed decisions.”⁸⁸ Deloitte also owns CampusCloud and offers numerous other proprietary systems to assist institutions of higher education with everything from artificial intelligence to enrollment, human resources and “tax recovery.”⁸⁹

Criticism of Higher Education Consulting Firms

Under the guise of “academic reprioritization,” consulting firms gather institutional and publicly available data to develop dashboards and make recommendations on program cuts, consolidations and restructuring. These dashboards often include student academic and demographic data, detailed financial records, student and alumni surveys, postgraduate employment data (often also obtained via survey), and “market demand” data (often in the form of an analysis of what search terms pre-enrollment students use to find their degree program). There are several reasons why the use of management consultants in higher education should be concerning to educators and the campus community. Consulting firms are taking advantage of vulnerable institutions, collecting massive amounts of student data, and extracting payments with little evidence of useful results. Below, we outline some of the arguments against hiring outside consultants.

Consultants undermine shared governance and diminish educators’ voice in decision-making.

Higher education’s system of shared governance recognizes the role of educators, administrators and governing boards in the management of colleges and universities. Under shared governance, the faculty as a collective body has the primary responsibility for curriculum, mode of instruction, and

⁸⁰ “Vista’s Portfolio,” Vista Equity Partners.

⁸¹ Business Wire, “PowerSchool and EAB Partner to Simplify College Admissions and Expand College Access for Millions of Students,” *Picante Today*, September 12, 2023, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://picante.today/blog/2023/09/12/powerschool-and-eab-partner-to-simplify-college-admissions-and-expand-college-access-for-millions-of-students/>.

⁸² Andrew Dorn, “Over 60M Kids’ Data May Have Been Stolen: What You Need to Know,” *Yahoo News*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/over-60m-kids-data-may-145624879.html>.

⁸³ “Vista’s Portfolio,” Vista Equity Partners; “About Us: Our Journey,” Ellucian, <https://www.ellucian.com/news/ellucian-acquire-campuslogic-leader-student-financial-success>; “Strengthening Our Mission of Student Financial Success,” Ellucian, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240226080314/https://www.ellucian.com/campuslogic-ellucian>.

⁸⁴ Rob Wolfe, “The Student Recruitment Industrial Complex,” *Washington Monthly*, October 29, 2024, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2024/10/29/the-student-recruitment-industrial-complex/>.

⁸⁵ “The Change Leader’s Team of Higher Education Consultants,” The Change Leader, Inc., <https://changinghighered.com/the-change-leader-higher-education-consulting-firm/our-team-of-higher-education-consultants/>.

⁸⁶ “Build the Class You Want with RNL’s Strategic Solutions for Undergraduate Enrollment Management,” RNL, <https://www.ruffalonl.com/enrollment-management-solutions/>.

⁸⁷ Blumenstyk, “Tough Times for Colleges.”

⁸⁸ “Deloitte Higher Education,” Deloitte, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/public-sector/solutions/higher-education-services.html>; Claire Bushey, “Deloitte Adds Muscle in Higher-Ed Tech Consulting,” *Chicago Business*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20160301/NEWS04/160309978/deloitte-adds-muscle-in-higher-ed-tech-consulting>.

⁸⁹ “Deloitte CampusCloud Transforms Higher Education Operations,” Deloitte, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://www.deloitte.com/na/en/alliances/oracle/perspectives/deloitte-campuscloud-transforms-higher-ed-operations.html>; “Deloitte Higher Education,” Deloitte.

aspects of the student experience that relate to the academic mission of the institution.⁹⁰

The “portfolio review” led by the consulting firms often includes forming a separate task force or working group under the guise of including the campus community in the process, bypassing existing democratic bodies such as faculty senates or educator unions. When administrators have the opportunity to choose the educators for such a task force, they often choose faculty who are already aligned with the goals of cutting programs rather than deferring to the faculty senate, union or similar body to appoint those task force members. That task force then presents a plan crafted with only a veneer of faculty input, despite the plan having obvious implications for academic matters. In some cases, the attack on the shared governance system is more direct: The president of the University of Kentucky, which hired EAB for an academic review in 2021, proposed in 2024 to abolish the University Senate. He recommended replacing it with an advisory board and endowing the provost with all decisions on academic programs.⁹¹

The data and tools exist to make mission-driven decisions without hiring an external consultant.

The administrators and board of trustees are responsible for overseeing the budgets and financial stability of the institution. They have the enrollment, staff and financial data that is necessary to make mission-driven decisions without the input of a consulting company. Even the external sources, such as industrywide labor data or information on student demand, frequently come from public sources that are already available without paying a consulting firm (see Gray DI’s use of Google search analytics as an example).

The consultants then only contribute elaborate dashboards to justify decisions the administration already wants to make. The firms can message their research and analysis, or weight specific metrics, in whatever way the administration needs to defend changing particular programs. As EAB says on its website, it “work[s] with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve.”⁹²

We are seeing a variety of ways in which the use of AI is expanding in education consulting as well. Gray Decision Intelligence’s Program Evaluation System uses AI to “answer questions, predict results, generate visualizations, and write summaries.” EAB also uses AI and predictive analytics in its offerings.⁹³

This approach also provides a ready scapegoat when the community begins to push back. Ronald G. Ehrenberg, “a Cornell University higher-education scholar, has noted, “college leaders hire consultants when they ‘want someone to take the heat.’”⁹⁴ Administrators can deflect the attention for bad decisions to the consultant instead of taking responsibility for their management of the institution.

The consultants force a corporate decision-making model onto a mission-driven institution.

Education is not meant to operate as a business, where the primary focus is profitability. Higher education institutions have unique cultures and needs that are not best served by business-minded consultants.⁹⁵

Much like the critiques of standardized testing in K-12 schooling, student success cannot solely be measured in numbers. The emphasis on “return on investment” ignores the nonmonetary benefits of education for the students themselves and the institutions, as well as for the larger community. This disconnect drives the pushback against the recommendations stemming from consultant engagements.

The process of calculating metrics, such as Huron’s credit hour production, puts more focus on the number of bodies in seats for a particular amount of time than on the educational outcomes. Even a focus on postgraduation earnings oversimplifies higher education to solely workforce preparation, ignoring the value of the process of earning a degree.

When the University System of Maryland hired Huron in 2021, the UMD AAUP chapter wrote a letter of concern to the provost, which included the following reflection on how the consultant’s report fell short of the USM mission:

The mission of the USM includes “Preparing graduates with the knowledge, skills, and integrity necessary to be successful leaders and engaged citizens,

⁹⁰ “FAQs on Shared Governance,” American Association of University Professors, accessed August 11, 2025, <https://www.aaup.org/issues-higher-education/shared-governance/faqs-shared-governance>.

⁹¹ Ryan Quinn, “Faculty Power on the Line in Kentucky,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/shared-governance/2024/06/05/faculty-power-under-threat-university-kentucky>.

⁹² Seramount, “EAB to Acquire Forage to Bridge the Gap Between College and Career for Millions of Students,” press release, April 8, 2024, <https://seramount.com/about-us/seramount-news-and-press/eab-acquires-forage-to-bridge-the-gap-between-college-and-career-for-millions-of-students/>.

⁹³ PR Newswire, “Gray Associates Changes Name to Gray Decision Intelligence,” press release, November 1, 2023, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/gray-associates-changes-name-to-gray-decision-intelligence-301974115.html>.

⁹⁴ Goldie Blumenstyk, “2014 Influence List: Hired Guns,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/2014-influence-list-hired-guns/>.

⁹⁵ Blumenstyk, “Tough Times for Colleges.”

while providing knowledge-based programs and services that are responsive to needs of the state and the nation.” But Huron’s planning documents say little about how students will develop the necessary critical thinking skills, and nothing at all about the kinds of education that an informed citizenry requires.

Instead, planning documents portray the University as a producer of workers entering the job market. We agree that the USM should be preparing the teachers, nurses, and experts in cybersecurity that our state requires. We note, however, that areas such as educational services, arts, entertainment, and recreation are also areas of projected growth on which Huron’s documents do not comment. A plethora of research studies also show that non-STEM majors are in high demand in many areas and have excellent long-term job prospects.

Furthermore, higher education is not merely a strategy for growing Maryland’s economy. Higher education can and should train future citizens.⁹⁶

There is a lack of evidence that the program cuts and other changes recommended by external consultants improve education, avoid budget crises or prevent closures.

Most consultants are engaged for short terms, often three years or less, without any metrics to evaluate their results. From the contracts we have seen, the consultant is paid regardless of the outcome. After a thorough search, we have not found an independent assessment of the effectiveness of higher education consultants or their software. EAB itself produced a report in 2014 in which, “after looking at nearly two-dozen ‘engagements’—excluding its own—EAB found that the hired guns all seemed to be working from the same playbook and that the results of their efforts—for all the millions expended by their clients—were at best ‘mixed.’”⁹⁷

Part of the difficulty with conducting an independent assessment is that the contracts with and recommendations from consultants are not always made public. They may be shared with administrators, or an administration-chosen task force, but the full reports and data are not shared with staff, stu-

dents and the community. For example, during his brief tenure as University of Florida president, Ben Sasse hired McKinsey & Company (where he was once an adviser) for \$4.7 million with no public scope of work or contract.⁹⁸ Many of the client examples included in this report relied on public records requests, archived websites and summary documents in lieu of the actual reports.

Consultant engagements are expanding from short-term contracts into multiyear software agreements, both of which take valuable funding away from the classroom.

Many of the companies mentioned here began as financial consultants, specifically Huron and rpk GROUP. Over the past decade, the firms have expanded to more areas of higher education management to become a one-stop shop for all outsourcing needs. This includes strategic planning, crisis management, human resources, diversity and equity policy, marketing, enrollment and student data, curriculum and online education. At this point, a university can outsource any part of its operations to a consulting firm.

Huron and EAB both acquire other companies to expand their offerings and embed themselves further with their university clients. For example, in 2014, Huron began investing in the parent company for Shorelight Education, “which specializes in the recruitment and retention of international students, namely through online platforms.”⁹⁹ This gave it a tool to market to potential clients to boost enrollment of international students. These acquisitions allow a firm to expand the list of services it can charge for and additional software it can sell to colleges and universities.

Navigating the transition to a new software system is a good revenue generator for any consulting firm. There are multiple opportunities to charge clients during the process: for managing the transition, soliciting and evaluating bids, training staff, and troubleshooting. This can take years to complete.

Anecdotally, our members have seen that, once the institution signs a contract for the use of a consulting firm’s proprietary software, administrators may require staff to use the software to justify the expense, regardless of whether it helps educators and staff members do their jobs.

⁹⁶ United Academics of Maryland-AAUP Executive Committee, “The USM Strategic Planning: The UMD-AAUP Response,” letter to colleagues, June 22, 2021, <https://uamumd.org/the-usm-strategic-planning-the-umd-aaup-response/>; United Academics of Maryland-AAUP Executive Committee, “UMD AAUP Concerned,” letter to provost. For more about USM’s mission, see Board of Regents, “The USM through 2020: A Renewed Vision for Powering Maryland Forward,” University System of Maryland, February 19, 2018, <https://www.usmd.edu/10yrplan/USM-through-2020-Strategic-Plan-Update.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Blumenstyk, “2014 Influence List: Hired Guns.”

⁹⁸ Blumenstyk, “2014 Influence List: Hired Guns”; Josh Moody, “Questions Linger After Sasse’s Departure from U of Florida,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 20, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2024/08/20/sasses-spending-exit-leave-lingering-questions-uf>.

⁹⁹ “Meet Huron Consulting, the Corporate Firm Behind The New School Restructuring: Huron Fact Sheet,” The New School Chapter of AAUP, October 2, 2020, <https://www.thenewschoolaaup.org/actions/huron-fact-sheet>; Rebecca Koenig, “A Pandemic Sales Pitch to International Students: Start Your U.S. Degree Online, at Home,” *EdSurge*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-07-23-a-pandemic-sales-pitch-to-international-students-start-your-u-s-degree-online-at-home>; U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, “Huron Consulting Group Inc. Annual Report on Form 10-K for Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2023,” <https://www.sec.gov/ix?doc=/Archives/edgar/data/1289848/000128984824000036/hurn-20231231.htm>.

The commodification of student data is spreading far faster than we can track.

There is existing public concern over EAB-owner Vista Equity's acquisition of companies that collect student data. A reporter with *The Markup* reviewed documents obtained through a public records request and found that Vista's companies "collectively, gather everything from basic demographic information—entered automatically when a student enrolls in school—to data about students' citizenship status, religious affiliation, school disciplinary records, medical diagnoses, what speed they read and type at, the full text of answers they give on tests, the pictures they draw for assignments, whether they live in a two-parent household, whether they've used drugs, been the victim of a crime, or expressed interest in LGBTQ+ groups, among hundreds of other data points."¹⁰⁰ This information is not readily available to students or their families. In follow-up on this reporting, the advocacy group Illinois Families for Public Schools sent a letter of concern about Vista Equity's portfolio of education tech companies, including PowerSchool, Naviance and EAB, to its U.S. senators. The letter suggested that so-called ed-tech companies may be out of compliance with Illinois' Student Online Personal Protection Act, as well as multiple federal student privacy laws.¹⁰¹ Centralization of student data also presents a cybersecurity risk, increasing the chance that a computer intrusion could lead to the theft of sensitive data on millions of students. Vista's PowerSchool was breached in 2024, and sensitive data of more than 60 million students and 10 million teachers was stolen.¹⁰²

Cutting programs eliminates education options and may prevent students from completing their degree, leaving the students with education debt.

As tech companies, the consultants seem to push colleges and universities to add and expand tech-oriented majors while targeting the humanities for cuts. Administrators at West Virginia University, which hired rpk GROUP, said they were "responding to a budget shortfall, declining enrollment, flagging student interest in humanities courses, and pressure from parents who want their kids to be prepared

for good-paying jobs after graduation." Gordon Gee, the university's president said, "We will have a new normal. We are going to be much more oriented toward listening to the people who pay our bills—parents, students, legislators and others. And they very much want to see universities, particularly land grant institutions like ours, become engines of creativity and economic development."¹⁰³

As one WVU alum wrote, rpk GROUP's suggestions focused on growing "programs that serve the tech industry."¹⁰⁴ That priority can "sap states of intellectual firepower, leaving them with fewer leaders and citizens who are well-rounded."¹⁰⁵

WVU was specifically created to provide rural students access to higher education. So, when the board proposed axing 28 programs (8 percent of majors offered) in 2023, it hit rural families especially hard. Those students do not necessarily have the means to complete their degree at another campus within an affordable distance. A student at the time said, "Students like me can't afford to go anywhere else. I can't get this kind of education anywhere else in the state. The administration is telling me I'm only allowed to learn what they decide not to discontinue."¹⁰⁶

This may have a particularly adverse effect on minority students, first generation students and rural students. Gray DI's Bob Atkins noted that using enrollment thresholds as a primary metric often eliminates programs that serve minority students. He said at one university, located in a state with mandatory cuts for programs that had five or fewer graduates over five years, he noticed a pattern in the types of degrees getting cut: "What I saw was that many of the programs about minority students [were getting cut]. ... You'll often see Africana studies on that list, and several of them were Native American culture programs. You would think that would be random, but when you realize it's going to cut out a bunch of programs in a given discipline, you begin to get worried that you might be doing something more fundamental to the university than trimming fur off the dog."¹⁰⁷ This is yet another example of how only using qualitative metrics can hurt an educational program.

¹⁰⁰ Todd Feathers, "This Private Equity Firm Is Amassing Companies that Collect Data on America's Children," *The Markup*, January 11, 2022, <https://themarkup.org/machine-learning/2022/01/11/this-private-equity-firm-is-amassing-companies-that-collect-data-on-americas-children>. The documents: <https://www.documentcloud.org/app?q=%2Bproject%3Apowerschool-205478%20>.

¹⁰¹ Cassie Creswell and Leonie Haimson, letter to Sen. Richard Durbin, Illinois Families for Public Schools, January 20, 2022, https://www.ilfps.org/letter_durbin_naviance.

¹⁰² Anna Merod, "College Student Charged in Connection with PowerSchool Data Breach," *K-12 Dive*, May 21, 2025, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/college-student-charged-in-connection-with-powerschool-data-breach/748747/>.

¹⁰³ Elaine S. Povich, "Flagship Public Universities Likely to Cut More Humanities, Staff—Especially in Rural States," *West Virginia Watch*, December 15, 2023, <https://westvirginiawatch.com/2023/12/15/flagship-public-universities-likely-to-cut-more-humanities-staff-especially-in-rural-states/>.

¹⁰⁴ Myya Helm, "Everyone at West Virginia University Knew Something Was Up. I Hate That We Were Right," *Slate*, August 18, 2023, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2023/08/west-virginia-university-cuts-programs.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Povich, "Flagship Public Universities."

¹⁰⁶ Helm, "Everyone at West Virginia." Number of programs cut: Leah Willingham, "Following Program Cuts, New West Virginia University Student Union Says Fight Is Not Over," *Associated Press*, April 7, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/west-virginia-university-student-union-budget-cuts-139c2e5c638e009555c3c19c17caf5dd>.

¹⁰⁷ Alexandra Vollman, "A Cautionary Tale," *Insight into Diversity*, November 26, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211130094458/https://www.insightintodiversity.com/a-cautionary-tale/>.

How to Identify When Consultants Are on Campus

In many cases, a consulting firm contract or new significant expense can only be approved if there is a request for proposals, a bid and then a vote by the board of trustees in a public meeting to hire the firm and add the expense to the budget. The process might not be as public at a small private institution or if the firm is hired within an existing budget line. Here are some things to look out for to identify whether a consulting firm or individual consultant may be coming to campus.

Public meetings and records

A straightforward way to look for activity is to track the trustee meetings. When these meetings are public, an individual may be able to monitor agendas posted online, attend meetings and read minutes posted online afterward.

Another source of information is through public records requests, which would be available if the institution is public or, possibly, if it receives significant federal funding. RFPs, contracts and communications about a particular issue may be requested. There are guides online for how to craft and track a public records request. Best practices include:

- Request actual documents and ask for addendums, exhibits, schedules, etc. to be included.
- Consider starting the request broadly and narrowing it as you figure out what is available.
- For communications, limit the request by recipient and dates.

Consistent references to budget deficits and/or enrollment issues

Declining enrollment in higher education has become the recent boogeyman to indicate an impending crisis and the need for cuts. Even within institutions that have strong enrollment, fluctuations within individual degree programs or within a specific college may be used as an excuse to end those programs, either by pausing enrollment of new students, restricting transfers or removing the program completely from degree offerings.

The numbers are not all dire, and many institutions who saw enrollment declines are rebounding, specifically among community colleges.¹⁰⁸ Even in places without plateauing enrollment, this supposed national trend may be used as a scare tactic for hiring a consultant or for making drastic changes as a peremptory move.

Changes in language from administrators

Changes in language from administrators may indicate the influence of consultants. This includes administrators incorporating more business jargon into their explanations, specifically an emphasis on returns, margins or growth. These all terms the imply a shift in focus from academic achievement and research to revenues and profit. “Return on investment,” a common business term, is used to calculate the profit derived from the financial resources invested, which ignores the other benefits of those investments. Consultants are encouraging institutions to think along the same terms: What alumni dollars are recouped from students in a particular program? Which majors are the cheapest to offer, thus guaranteeing increased profit from student tuition?

After a consultant has been engaged, we also hear administrators using more euphemisms to avoid saying that programs are cut or canceled. We have heard numerous terms to make the change seem more palatable, including “sunset,” “pause” and “rightsize,” among others. In some states, such as New York, “discontinuing” a program requires the approval of the state Department of Education, while “suspending” the program does not trigger any reporting requirements. Thus, after employing Gray DI as a consultant, D’Youville University “paused” programs instead of outright cutting them, to avoid that step. Regardless, students still had to scramble to complete their degree.¹⁰⁹

How/When to Push Back

Whether or not a consultant is already present on campus, there are practical ways to push back to limit their influence, guarantee the rights of educators and staff, and protect students.

Do the research.

This report offers a number of sources and opportunities to collect information on current or potential consultants on your campus. The Scholars for a New Deal for Higher

¹⁰⁸ Heather Hollingsworth, “US Colleges Are Cutting Majors and Slashing Programs After Years of Putting It Off,” *Associated Press*, August 21, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/college-degree-programs-cuts-music-f0c271f6d61a13404f93688fcc6c589b>.

¹⁰⁹ Bader, “Colleges Say They’re Cash-Strapped”; “Proposal to Register a General Academic Program,” New York State Education Department, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.nysed.gov/college-university-evaluation/proposal-register-general-academic-program>; “Change or Adapt a Registered Program,” New York State Education Department, <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/het-change-form.docx>.

Education also has a toolkit with more information for gathering details that can assist a campaign.¹¹⁰

Talk to your local union and the AFT-AAUP.

The staff of your local union, your advocacy chapter and the national union can help develop a plan to get information, organize a campaign and push back against contracting with consultants and their recommendations. Specifically, reach out to the AFT's research, strategic initiatives and economic security department and the AFT Higher Education division. The AFT can also be helpful to navigate impact bargaining and explore possible violations of the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act.

Collaborate with students, alumni, families and the community around the campus.

Students, alumni and their families are in a unique position to apply pressure to a college or university. They may be able to make demands that faculty cannot. For example, students at WVU formed the West Virginia United Students' Union to fight the cuts, "mobilize against any additional proposed cuts and prepare alternative proposals to keep curriculum and faculty positions in place."¹¹¹ Additionally, as graduates, alumni are more protected from potential retaliation and can call out their alma mater for not upholding its mission and values.

The community is also a valuable ally. Especially in communities where the higher education institution is a primary employer, local business owners have a vested interest in the sustainability and growth of the campus. If the campus contracts, the surrounding businesses suffer. They lose customers and their pool of potential employees—students and alumni—would shrink. While the local chamber of commerce might not have been an ally historically, this may be an issue that can galvanize that relationship.

Conduct an economic impact assessment.

Economic impact reports are an increasingly common way for a university, hospital or other institution to show the ben-

efit it has to its community and the state. Also called community impact reports, they incorporate a variety of quantitative and qualitative data to show how the institutions drive the economy through job creation, taxes, support of local vendors, and so on. The salaries paid to staff can have a multiplying effect within the economy since that money is often spent in the community in the form of rent, utilities and the purchase of goods and services, spreading the benefit to multiple other entities. Some categories can be broken down for individual programs, showing the benefit of offering particular degree programs.

The Association of American Universities and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities issued guidelines for impact reports in 2014; AAU's website contains links to more than 50 reports from colleges and universities around the country.¹¹²

Here are some examples of impact reports and their findings:

- From University of South Florida for 2019-20: "With 16,277 employees, USF is the 14th largest public employer in Florida," and "Every dollar in state funding helped generate \$14.07 in economic output."¹¹³ The report was produced by USF's Muma College of Business.
- The University of Georgia conducted its own economic impact analysis and found that "economic impact on the state surged to a record \$8.1 billion in 2023."¹¹⁴
- Montgomery College's fiscal year 2023 analysis found that the "average annual rate of return for taxpayers is 1.6%."¹¹⁵
- A study of fiscal year 2023 found that the University of Illinois "generated \$24.9 billion in economic impact and supported more than 225,000 jobs across Illinois."¹¹⁶
- The American Association of Community Colleges hired Lightcast to conduct an analysis for all U.S. community colleges; it was published in 2022.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ "Tools and Resources," Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education, <https://scholarsforanewdealforhigher.org/resources/>; S. Ani Mukherji, "How to File a Public Records Request: For Public University Workers Who Want to Know More," Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1k1YUEX6MkQV-qcJJHVd5JeX8gRK92vCY/edit>.

¹¹¹ Willingham, "Following Program Cuts."

¹¹² Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and Association of American Universities, "Economic Engagement Framework: Economic Impact Guidelines," December 2014, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.aau.edu/economic-impact>.

¹¹³ Shivendu Shivendu and Roohid Ahmed Syed, "University of South Florida: Economic Impact, July 1, 2019-June 30, 2020," University of South Florida, December 3, 2021, accessed August 13, 2024, <https://www.usf.edu/about-usf/economic-impact.aspx>.

¹¹⁴ Mike Wooten, "UGA Economic Impact Hits New High of \$8.1 Billion," *UGA Today*, February 1, 2024, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://news.uga.edu/uga-economic-impact-hits-new-high-of-8-1-billion/>. The study was led by Michael Adjemian, professor in the University of Georgia Department of Agricultural & Applied Economics.

¹¹⁵ Lightcast, "The Economic Value of Montgomery College," Montgomery College, December 2024, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/offices/planning-and-policy/economic-impact-study.html>; "The Economic Value of Montgomery College: Fact Sheet," September 2021, Montgomery College, https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/_documents/offices/institutional-research-and-effectiveness/special-reports/2021-ems-mc-factsheet.pdf.

¹¹⁶ Lightcast, "Analysis of the Economic Impact and Return on Investment of Education: The Economic Value of the University of Illinois System," University of Illinois System, June 2025, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.uillinois.edu/about/economic-impact>.

¹¹⁷ Lightcast, "The Economic Value of America's Community Colleges: Executive Summary," American Association of Community Colleges, July 2022, accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AACC_ExecSum_1920_Formatted-Finalv2.pdf.

The process can be conducted by the institution itself, which will have the best access to data but can then also control what information is shared. It would be best to have a third party complete the report to maintain neutrality. For recommendations of vendors and academics who conduct this work, please reach out to the AFT research, strategic initiatives and economic security department.

Use collective bargaining and strong contract language to protect students and faculty jobs.

Collective bargaining agreements and negotiations can be used to lay the groundwork to resist the influx of enrollment consultants. The AFT Higher Education division and the AFT Center for Collective Bargaining (within the research, strategic initiatives and economic security department) have examples of collective bargaining language to protect the work of educators, protect employee rights during mergers and acquisitions, and ensure students continue to receive the academic programs they enrolled for. Also, when there are rumors of closures, cuts or layoffs, union members have the right to demand impact bargaining to bargain the effects of such changes. Reach out for more information and a copy of the AFT's Real Solutions for Higher Education toolkit.

Success Stories

The news is full of examples of faculty fighting back.¹¹⁸ The AFT-AAUP locals and chapters have been pivotal in pushing back against cuts at Columbia College Chicago, Utica College and others. See Appendix A for a list of all clients we found during this research to see if another local may have useful information.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education are navigating a particularly difficult climate. The Trump administration has engaged in unprecedented intimidation of institutions of higher learning and has unilaterally cut funding in ways that exacerbate existing financial pressures. In this time of uncertainty, administrators should seek to work closely with the professors and staff of colleges and universities to find creative solutions. Instead, many are turning to high-priced consulting firms that offer warmed-over policy prescriptions. Ignoring the expertise of our members and casting aside shared governance unsurprisingly results in disastrous cuts to programs or outright program closures, causing turmoil for students, staff and the communities. Our students, staff and citizens deserve better.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Blumenstyk, "Tough Times for Colleges"; Goldie Blumenstyk, "Business Advice Meets Academic Culture," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 29, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/At-UNT-Dallas-Consultants/131736/>; Don Troop, "Shared-Services Plans Rile Faculty Members at 2 Flagships," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 10, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/Shared-Services-Plans-Rile/143527/>; Peter Schmidt, "Tensions Between Faculty Members and Consultants Come to a Head in Minn.," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 24, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/Tensions-Between-Faculty/149651/>.

Appendix A

Gray Decision Intelligence Client List

Loyola University New Orleans¹

York College of Pennsylvania²

Monroe Community College³

Youngstown State University⁴

Oral Roberts University⁵

University of Indianapolis⁶

Miami University (Ohio)⁷

D'Youville University (formerly D'Youville College)⁸

Bradley University⁹

University of Wisconsin-Platteville¹⁰

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh¹¹

University of Maine at Farmington¹²

Mercer University¹³

Middlesex Community College¹⁴

Holyoke Community College¹⁵

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education¹⁶

Western Kentucky University¹⁷

Southern Illinois University Carbondale¹⁸

Bismarck State College, North Dakota's Polytechnic Institution¹⁹

University of Wyoming²⁰

EAB

Columbia College Chicago²¹

Augustana College²²

Bradley University²³

Butler University²⁴

Hope College²⁵

Illinois State University²⁶

Knox College²⁷

National Louis University²⁸

Valparaiso University²⁹

¹ Gray Associates, "BKD Partners with Gray Associates, Leveraging Gray's Data, Analytics, and Software to Help Colleges and Universities Improve Financial Sustainability and Growth," press release, *PR Newswire* June 19, 2019, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/bkd-partners-with-gray-associates-leveraging-grays-data-analytics-and-software-to-help-colleges-and-universities-improve-financial-sustainability-and-growth-300871041.html>.

² Gray Associates, "BKD Partners with Gray Associates."

³ Gray Associates, "BKD Partners with Gray Associates."

⁴ "Academic Program Enhancement and Effectiveness Initiative," Youngstown State University, 2020, <https://ysu.edu/strategic-planning/apeei>.

⁵ Neal Stenzel, "IMPACT 2030: Financial Sustainability," Oral Roberts University, 2018, <https://oru.edu/pdfs/faculty-and-staff/faculty/fac-docs/05-financial-sustainability.pdf>.

⁶ "Systems Portfolio," University of Indianapolis, May 30, 2019, <https://www.uindy.edu/about-uindy/images/systems-portfolio.pdf>.

⁷ "Academic Prioritization," Miami University, accessed January 30, 2026, https://miamioh.edu/academic-affairs/admin-affairs/acad_prioritization/index.html.

⁸ Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, "Appendix 12.4 Policies: D'Youville 2020 Playbook," pp. 228, 264, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221222155948/http://www.pegab.ca/Private/DYouville/12%20-%20Appendix%2012-4%20Policies%20and%20Procedures%20Organization%20Review%20pdfs.pdf>.

⁹ Bradley University Senate, 2018-2019 meeting minutes, May 8, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240517214623/https://www.bradley.edu/academic/cio/senate/assets/docs/20182019/Agenda2019-05-08.pdf> (see p. 46, the Department of Sociology, Criminology & Social Work's "Response to Proposed Program Prioritization Plan," April 24, 2019, for a critique of Gray's model).

¹⁰ Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System Education Committee, meeting agenda, December 5, 2019, [https://www.wisconsin.edu/regents/download/meeting-materials/2019/december_5-6_2019/Education-Committee---December-5-2019-\(no-WPP-report\).pdf](https://www.wisconsin.edu/regents/download/meeting-materials/2019/december_5-6_2019/Education-Committee---December-5-2019-(no-WPP-report).pdf).

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North Park University³⁰
William Paterson University³¹
Miami University (Ohio)³²
Colorado School of Mines³³
Pikes Peak State College (formerly Pikes Peak Community College)³⁴
University of Kentucky³⁵
Holyoke Community College³⁶
The College of Saint Rose³⁷
Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education³⁸
East Stroudsburg University³⁹
West Chester University⁴⁰
Slippery Rock University⁴¹
Indiana University of Pennsylvania⁴²
Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania-Mansfield (formerly Mansfield University)⁴³
Bowling Green State University⁴⁴

Middle Tennessee State University⁴⁵
Kutztown University⁴⁶
University of Connecticut⁴⁷
Southern Connecticut State University⁴⁸
Winthrop University⁴⁹
East Tennessee State University⁵⁰
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Gallaudet University⁵¹
University of Virginia⁵²
Vermont State Colleges System⁵³
University of Central Missouri⁵⁴
University of Missouri-Kansas City⁵⁵
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Anne Arundel Community College⁵⁷
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West Virginia University⁶⁰

St. John's University⁶¹

List of rpk GROUP's clients from its website:⁶²

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o Achieving The Dream	o Hartford Seminary	o The City University of New York
o Akilah School for Girls – Rwanda	o Hilbert College	o The George Washington University
o American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education	o Howard Community College	o The University of Texas at Austin
o American Association of State Colleges and Universities	o Jarvis Christian College	o The University of Texas at Dallas
o American Council on Education	o Jobs for the Future (JFF)	o The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
o American Public Land Grant Universities	o Kansas Board of Regents	o The World Bank
o Anne Arundel Community College	o Keuka College	o Trinity Church Wall Street
o Aspen Institute	o KnowledgeWorks	o University of California, Riverside
o Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities	o Loyola Marymount University	o University of Central Missouri
o Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	o Loyola University Maryland	o University of Kansas
o Carroll Community College	o Lumina Foundation	o University System of Maryland
o Cecil Community College	o Marshall University	o University of Missouri-Kansas City
o Church Divinity School of the Pacific	o Michigan Technological University	o University of Missouri
o College Futures Foundation	o Midwestern State University	o University of Missouri System
o Delaware State University	o NACUBO	o University of North Carolina System
o Dillard University	o New Jersey City University	o University of North Carolina Greensboro
o East Tennessee State University	o Next Generation Learning Challenges	o University of St. Thomas
o EDUCAUSE	o Northeast Ohio Medical University	o University of Virginia
o Emerson College	o Northwest Missouri State University	o University of West Florida
o Equity Accelerator	o Notre Dame of Maryland University	o Utica College
o Excelsior College	o Oakland Community College	o Vermont State Colleges System
o Frederick Community College	o Ohio Association of Community Colleges	o Vietnamese-German University – Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam
o Gallaudet University	o Pittsburg State University	o Washington State University Tri-Cities
o Goucher College	o Quality Assurance Commons	o West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission
o Gulf Coast State College	o Rider University	o West Virginia University
	o Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors	
	o Rockhurst University	
	o Shepherd University	
	o St. Bonaventure University	
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	o SUNY Erie	
	o SUNY System	

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University of Wisconsin⁶³

Rutgers University⁶⁴

University of New Hampshire⁶⁵

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University of Minnesota⁷⁰

University of Maryland⁷¹

University of Michigan-Flint⁷²

Bloomfield College⁷³

University of Tennessee⁷⁴

University of Connecticut⁷⁵

American University⁷⁶

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