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Saving Lives, Building Futures, Powering the Economy

AFT/AAUP Higher Education State Policy Wins for 2025 and 2026

This memo highlights state policy wins over the past two years. They include both the success of proactive measures that reflect the goals of the AFT/American Association of University Professors' "A Blueprint for Strengthening and Transforming Higher Education," and the defeat of legislation that would have had harmful consequences for our members, their students and the communities they serve. We are sharing these examples to help guide and inform affiliates in developing their upcoming state legislative agendas and their strategies for fighting back against legislative attacks.

Taken together, these policy wins—both proactive measures passed and threats defeated—uphold our union's commitment to the tenets of our blueprint: students' right to learn; affordability, accessibility and completion; strengthening our communities; and respecting and empowering faculty, staff and student workers. Our goal is to strengthen higher education by defending it from political capture, restoring public investment, respecting labor and recentering student learning so students receive the education they deserve.

While policy attacks in higher education are not unprecedented, the last two years have seen a significant escalation in hostility from the GOP in every aspect of higher education. Assaults on funding, tenure, accreditation, governance, institutional culture, immigration, curriculum and student life have meant that faculty and staff increasingly work in unstable conditions that undermine teaching, research and student learning and support.

PEN America has outlined specific ways 2026 laws are censuring campuses in the form of:

- Educational gag orders restricting what topics can be taught or discussed in class
- Banning topics from required courses
- Undermining shared governance and politicizing curriculum
- Hollowing out tenure

And in 2025, 16 states passed 22 bills that censor higher education through policies like restricting what can be taught; weakening tenure; diminishing long-held shared governance standards; silencing administrative leaders, faculty, and staff by requiring institutional neutrality; and more.

Even in the face of this hostile landscape, AFT and AAUP affiliates are fighting back and have achieved significant policy wins that advance the vision of higher education as a public good and a democratic necessity.

WINS AT A GLANCE

Proactive measures:

- Artificial intelligence—California, New York, Illinois
- Collective bargaining—California, Maryland, Rhode Island, Utah
- Due process—California
- Governance—Colorado, New Mexico, Illinois, New York
- Healthcare—New Mexico
- Immigration—Sensitive locations/Supports for undocumented students—Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Maine, Oregon, New York, Vermont, California
- Libraries—California, Illinois
- Loan forgiveness—New Mexico
- Pension reforms—New York, Washington
- Revenue—New York, California, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, Pennsylvania
- Salary and benefits increase for faculty and/or staff—New York, California, Connecticut, New Mexico
- Tuition/Student funding—New York, California, Connecticut, Pennsylvania

Threats defeated:

- Anti-DEI—Iowa, Kansas, New Hampshire, Oklahoma
- Anti-LGBTQIA+—Indiana
- Curriculum attacks—Iowa, Missouri, Pennsylvania
- Governance—Hawaii (funding), Iowa
- Immigration—Affordability for students—Kansas
- Tenure attacks—New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Kansas
- Workplace safety/Guns—New Hampshire

ANTI-DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

2026

- **IOWA:** Problematic bill failed to advance: (HF 2487) requiring the elimination of courses containing DEI-related concepts.
- **KANSAS:** Problematic bill failed to advance: (HB 2428) prohibiting DEI- or critical race theory-related practices or content in public higher ed institutions (except in degrees where racial, ethnic or gender studies are the primary focus) and requiring colleges and universities to establish general education requirements on the study of "American institutions." The American institutions course must include (among other things) a condemnation of communism as incompatible with freedom and an emphasis on limited federal government and states' rights.
- **NEW HAMPSHIRE:** A 2025 attack on DEI (HB 2) is currently being held at bay via court injunction.
- **OKLAHOMA:** Failed to advance a DEI attack bill (HB 3132) that requires replacing accreditors that have used any "diversity, equity and inclusion" practice or procedure in accreditation in the last five years.

ANTI-LGBTQIA+

2026

- **INDIANA** failed to advance SB 182 limiting trans students at public K-12 schools and state universities to using restrooms/locker rooms that match their gender assigned at birth.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

2026

- **CALIFORNIA:** Enacted SB 928, which prevents faculty from being replaced by artificial intelligence by requiring faculty employees to be a qualified person. (CFT's research brief on AI: "Keeping Classrooms Human-Centered")
- **ILLINOIS:** Enacted HB 1859 mandating that courses at community colleges must be taught by qualified faculty members and prohibiting AI as the sole source of instruction for students. Faculty members are free to utilize AI to enhance their course instruction.
- **NEW YORK:** Enacted S 7599C expanding AI regulations and protections for state government employees to K-12, higher education and municipal workers.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

2026

- **CALIFORNIA:** Empowered the Public Employment Relations Board to determine whether a memorandum between California State University and employee unions requires legislative action and/or action from the governor (AB 1818).
- **MARYLAND:** After a multiyear effort from AFT Maryland, collective bargaining rights have been granted to the majority of nontenure-track faculty at Maryland's four-year public universities (SB 6).

2025

- **RHODE ISLAND:** Codified collective bargaining rights for student workers (HB 5187/SB 124).
- **UTAH:** The labor coalition gathering signatures to overturn the recently passed public sector bargaining ban gathered 251,590 valid signatures, making it the most successful signature-gathering effort in state history.

CURRICULUM

2026

- **IOWA:** Problematic bill failed to advance: (HF 2361) shifting curriculum decisions away from faculty and universities toward the Legislature and politically created academic centers.
- **MISSOURI:** Failed to advance bill (HB 3221) prohibiting state funds for certain "low-earning outcome" academic degree programs (as defined in federal law).
- **PENNSYLVANIA:** The Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties' involvement helped ensure that 90-credit (accelerated three-year) bachelor's degrees were NOT included in the state's public school code as an option for bachelor's degree-granting institutions, despite a rushed push from proponents.

DUE PROCESS

2025

- **CALIFORNIA:** Enacted AB 1028, which established due process protections for part-time faculty with amendments CFT crafted to clarify that this does not impact reassignment rights. It requires the procedure for terminating a temporary employee to comply with the provisions of the local collective bargaining agreement that pertain to the termination of a temporary employee.

GOVERNANCE

2026

- **COLORADO:** Increased student representation on the higher education commission (HB 26-1029).
- **HAWAII:** Defeated a bill (SB 2602) that would have required excess money in the University of Hawaii's tuition and fees special fund to be transferred to the state's general fund, following strong opposition from the University of Hawaii Professional Assembly and the university.
- **IOWA:** Failed to advance a bill (SF 2033/SF 2232) to shift authority from faculty toward regents and the Legislature. However, some of its provisions—specifically, its "civic proficiency" agenda—were later incorporated into broader end-of-session legislation and budget negotiations, so they were still enacted in some form (HF 856, HF 2361).
- **NEW MEXICO:** If approved by New Mexico voters in November, HJR 1 will amend the state constitution to create nominating committees for Boards of Regents at public institutions. Currently, the governor has the sole power to make these appointments.

2025

- **ILLINOIS:** Enacted HB 3385, which instructs the board of trustees for each Illinois public college and university to create a panel with at least two administrators, two faculty members and one mental health professional. Each public college or university must have at least three on-site licensed counselors or social workers.

HEALTHCARE

2026

- **NEW MEXICO:** Approved a study bill on expanding health insurance to higher ed educators and graduate student employees (HM 4).

IMMIGRATION: SENSITIVE LOCATIONS/SUPPORTS FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

2026

- **CALIFORNIA:** Passed CFT-supported bill (AB 713) providing students who are undocumented the opportunity to apply for jobs at higher education institutions, but it was vetoed by the governor.
- **CONNECTICUT** (SB 397), **HAWAII** (HB 1870), **MASSSACHUSETTS** (H 5620), **MAINE** (LD 2106), **OREGON** (HB 4079), **NEW YORK** (2026 Budget), **VERMONT** (S 209): Restricted immigration enforcement actions near sensitive locations like schools and healthcare facilities.
- **KANSAS:** Governor vetoed a bill to repeal access to in-state tuition for undocumented students. The Legislature did not override the veto (SB 254).

LIBRARIES

2025

- **CALIFORNIA:** Approved a CFT-requested audit of historic public college and university library spending (going back as far as 30 years) that charts years of declining investment in public university libraries.
- **ILLINOIS:** Adopted a resolution (SJR 13) supported by the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the University Professionals of Illinois that creates the University Library and Professional Librarian

Access and Transparency Task Force to examine the current state of libraries and professional librarianship on Illinois public university campuses and present a recommendation to the General Assembly to ensure that public academic libraries and the educational services provided by professional librarian faculty remain viable and healthy benefits to Illinois students.

LOAN FORGIVENESS

2025

- **NEW MEXICO:** Enacted HB 69, which introduces a multiplier of 4.35 when calculating time worked under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Act. Specifically, this legislation will more quickly allow adjunct instructors to have their loans forgiven based on their public service as instructors at institutions of higher education.

PENSIONS

2026

- **NEW YORK:** Lowered contribution bands for the SUNY and CUNY Optional Retirement Program, reducing the amount employees must contribute and providing an additional 1 percent employer contribution into ORP members' accounts.
- **WASHINGTON:** Provided a one-time 3 percent cost-of-living increase, capped at $110 per month, to eligible Plan 1 retirees of the state's Teachers' Retirement System and Public Employees' Retirement System (SB 5862).

REVENUE

2026

- **CALIFORNIA:** Enacted a bill (SB 895) that creates a $7.5 billion fund (pending voter approval in March 2028) for scientific and health research grants, especially where federal funding has been cut.
- **NEW YORK:** Increased operating aid for the State University of New York by $49.3 million and base aid for SUNY community colleges by $11.5 million; provides debt-service relief ($80 million), operating aid ($100 million) and capital funding ($150 million) for SUNY hospitals. (New York State United Teachers, "2026 State Legislative Session Victories")
- **OREGON:** Disconnected state tax code from federal tax code changes included in the Big Ugly Bill, saving the state over $300 million in lost revenue (SB 1507). This is part of a multi-year strategy to increase state funding for public higher education.
- **PENNSYLVANIA:** Budget wins included a $5 million increase for the partnership between Cheyney University and Community College of Philadelphia; a $78 million increase on prior year funding for "facility transition costs" for Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education; a cost-of-living adjustment for retirees in the State Employees Retirement System and the Public School Employees' Retirement System who retired prior to 2001; and a $1 million increase for the Cheyney University Honors Academy ($7 million total).
- **RHODE ISLAND:** Enacted a $15.2 billion budget that includes a 3 percent millionaire's tax to be phased in over three years and a $275 million bond for higher education to be voted on this fall (and more).
- **WASHINGTON:** Established a millionaire's tax projected to bring in between $3.5 billion and $4 billion annually (SB 6346).

SALARY AND BENEFITS

2026

- **CALIFORNIA:** In the 2026-2027 budget, approved a CFT-supported measure that allows flexibility/reimbursement for vision and dental benefits for community college part-time faculty. And a CFT-supported measure for Social Security for part-time faculty (AB 2417) was approved by the governor.
- **CONNECTICUT:** Enacted full workers' compensation for injury due to workplace assault (PA 26-12).
- **NEW MEXICO:** Restored already budgeted 1 percent pay raises for state, education and higher education workers (SB 151).
- **NEW YORK:**
  - » CUNY budget wins: Salary increases, $23.5 million increase to fringe benefits, $500 million to infrastructure, $7.3 million increase in community colleges and more.
  - » SUNY/United University Professions contract wins: Negotiated with the governor, UUP ratified a new five-year contract that includes yearly salary increases (4.5 percent, 4 percent, 3.5 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent) along with other bonuses increased pay rates, expanded due process and job security protections, AI guardrails and more.

TENURE

2026

- **OKLAHOMA:** AAUP and AFT Oklahoma affiliates successfully stopped SB 1782, a threat to tenure protections at all public institutions after January 2027.

2025

- **KANSAS:** Failed to advance HB 2348, a bill to end tenure.

TUITION/STUDENT FUNDING

2026

- **CALIFORNIA:** Although it was vetoed by the governor, both chambers passed SB 632, a CFT-supported bill expanding eligibility for the California College Promise Grant to students enrolled in at least nine units per semester, as opposed to the current requirement of 12 units, to assist students who have part-time jobs or other life circumstances preventing them from enrolling full time.
- **CONNECTICUT:**
  - » Fully funded the "Mary Ann Handley Award" (formerly PACT) program, including the 4-year pilot program in the Connecticut State University System, after the governor attempted to defund it. The program provides debt-free public higher education by bridging the tuition gap students may have after receiving financial aid.
  - » Allocated $35 million in state aid from the Federal Cuts Response Fund to stabilize the University of Connecticut and UConn Health Center following 15 months of unprecedented federal research grant cuts. AAUP/AFT locals were instrumental in this win.

- **NEW YORK:** Expanded the SUNY and CUNY Reconnect program, which offers free community college for students ages 25 to 55 who are enrolled at a New York state two-year or four-year public higher education institution in an approved program leading to an associate degree in a high-

demand field. New eligible fields include air traffic control, logistics, transportation and emergency management. Students who already hold a postsecondary degree are also now eligible.

- **PENNSYLVANIA:**
  - Pennsylvania Promise Program, debt-free college program, passed in the House, getting further in the Legislature than it's ever gotten. If passed, the program would create a "last-dollar" scholarship program available to eligible students attending any public higher ed institution in the state, and certain households would also be eligible for a scholarship to cover housing and food (HB 2084).
  - Budget wins: $42.5 million for "Grow PA" scholarships, a $10 million (or 31 percent) increase from last year; $1 million for Mansfield for scholarships; $40 million for the Student Teacher Support Program.

WORKPLACE SAFETY/GUNS

2026

- **NEW HAMPSHIRE:** Amended bill (HB 1793) that would have enabled the open carry of guns on campuses; the bill was actively opposed by AFT-New Hampshire. It was amended to establish a legislative committee to study the feasibility, safety and storage of guns on campuses and to allow only faculty to have guns on campus while students/others can only have nonlethal weapons such as pepper spray.

To share additional wins, contact AFT Higher Ed highereddept@aft.org or SLI@aft.org.