



IOWA HIGHER EDUCATION COALITION

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Iowa Higher Education Coalition Rejects Trump's Higher Ed Compact

The coalition urges Board of Regents to save Iowa's public universities and dismiss partisan proposal

The Iowa Higher Education Coalition, representing faculty and graduate students at Iowa's three public universities, strongly rejects pleas for Iowa's Board of Regents to sign President Trump's "[Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education](#)."

The compact proposes to tie federal funding to agreeing to the compact's rules in eight areas, including: college admissions, academic freedom and freedom of speech on campuses and the existence of academic units deemed "against conservative ideas," faculty and administrative hiring, "institutional neutrality," student grades, binary definitions of student gender, a five-year freeze on tuition rates, and limits on international students.

"The compact would subject our Iowa-operated public universities to extortion, based on demonstrating partisan loyalty to the federal government," said Christopher Martin, president of United Faculty, the faculty union at the University of Northern Iowa. "Iowans would lose control of the universities. That's a terrible deal for Iowa taxpayers."

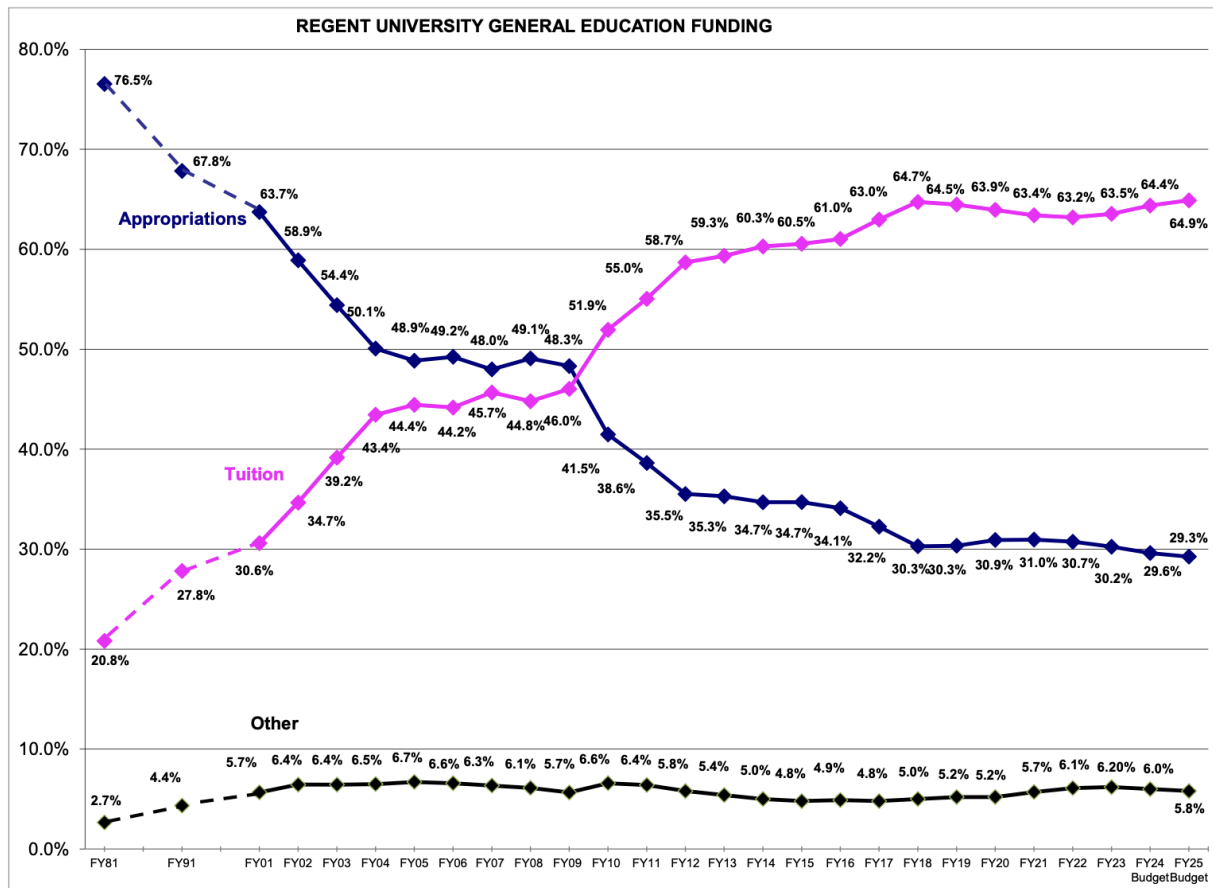
The higher ed compact document endorses the idea of "a vibrant marketplace of ideas," but specifically only mentions "conservative ideas" as ones that need protection. Moreover, the compact seeks to manage speech on campus via a "rigorous, good faith, empirical assessment of a broad spectrum of viewpoints among faculty, students, and staff at all levels." The compact's lack of definitions of the meaning of "a broad spectrum of viewpoints" makes signatories open to attack at any time, depending on the federal government's interpretation of "the university's performance against this compact."

"The proposed compact represents not a reform of higher education but an attempt to assert federal control over universities through the language of 'neutrality' and 'excellence'," said Fernando Calderón, vice president of United Faculty at UNI.

The compact would also be financially disastrous, proposing a five-year freeze on tuition rates at a time when the [state legislature funding for Iowa's universities is flat](#), creating an effective decrease in state funding for the Regents universities when accounting for inflation.

Tuition and fees are the [largest source of revenue](#) at Iowa's public universities, and have been so for more than 15 years. [The percentage of state support for general education funding](#) at Iowa's Regents universities has dropped from 78.5% in fiscal year 1981 to 29.3% in fiscal year 2025. Consequently,

tuition has had to fill in the shortfall, and has increased from 20.8% of general education funding support in 1981 to 64.9% in 2025. A five-year freeze on tuition would be ruinous for UI, ISU, and UNI, given the state’s long-term trend of declining support for the state’s Regents universities.



Source: Iowa Board of Regents, July 31, 2024, https://www.iowaregents.edu/media/cms/0724_ITEM_3_Budgets_C1D1C27A98881.pdf

Tuition freezes also have unintended consequences for students and families: In states where government entities have frozen tuition, net costs have actually INCREASED for students and their families, as institutions must decrease financial aid. This adversely affects less-resourced students and is the opposite of the intention to reduce costs, according to [a 2025 study by the Postsecondary Education & Economics Research Center](#).

Signing the compact would introduce unwarranted fiscal uncertainty along with intrusive federal oversight. Iowa’s universities would be bound to follow the compact’s vague and ideologically-driven requirements, subject to ongoing “[review by the Department of Justice](#).” In the event the DOJ found a university violated any parts of the compact - either willfully or negligently - the DOJ could compel the surrender of any federal benefits and freeze additional funding for at least a year. The compact appears to treat a wide range of matters – including student financial aid, research grants and student visas – as federal “benefits” that can be withheld at any moment. Public trust in universities necessitates stable financial planning. The compact undermines that.

“The compact weaponizes public funding to compel ideological obedience. It transforms education from a public good into a conditional privilege granted only to institutions willing to align with state-sanctioned norms,” Calderón stated.

The state already has broad protections for freedom of speech and civil discourse in the classroom for Iowa students and educators. For example, the Iowa Board of Regents' existing [Freedom of Expression Policy](#) states "the universities must strive to ensure the fullest degree of intellectual freedom and free expression allowed under the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States," and that "it is not the proper role of the Regent universities to shield individuals from speech protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which may include ideas and opinions the individual finds unwelcome, disagreeable, or even offensive."

Moreover, Iowa's public universities abide by the *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, which were promulgated by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the Association of American Colleges & Universities, and the Association of Governing Boards, of which the Iowa Board of Regents is a member. This landmark statement has guided college educators for 85 years. It makes clear that "Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject."

"We all want Iowa's public universities to be places where students and faculty - regardless of political orientation - are not just free but encouraged to pursue their own intellectual discovery and to contribute to a campus culture devoted to excellence, curiosity and tolerance," said Cullen Padgett-Walsh, president of Iowa State University's AAUP Chapter. "Bullying from the federal government isn't the way to get there."

The Iowa Higher Education Coalition, established in 2025, includes the following organizations:

- Iowa State AAUP (American Association of University Professors)
- UNI United Faculty, AAUP/AFT Local 6752
- University of Iowa AAUP
- UE Local 896 – COGS (Campaign to Organize Graduate Students), University of Iowa
- Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO

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