



April 2026

Issue
Brief

The Power of Governors in Public Higher- Education Reform

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Introduction

Most students in higher education attend public institutions, and those institutions are governed by public boards. This paper finds that 87% of undergraduates in four-year public colleges and universities attend schools whose boards are controlled by their state governors.

This fact differentiates American public higher education from American public K–12 education, where nearly all students are in schools governed by locally elected boards (instead of the governor or some other state authority). This also differentiates public higher-education institutions from private higher-education institutions, which have private boards insulated from external pressure. For reform-minded public policy professionals, therefore, state governors are the crucial entry point for improving higher education in the United States.

Since governing boards hire and fire college presidents and set the most important campus policies, U.S. governors could dramatically reform public higher education through their appointment power alone. Nearly two-thirds of the nation's public-college students are in states won by Donald Trump in 2024, so winning governors' races could transform higher education.

This paper maps out the primary governing entity for college boards in every state in the U.S. and offers suggestions for transforming public boards.

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The Entry Point to Reforming Higher Education

Those who want to reform American higher education often feel frustrated, even powerless. Colleges and universities are enormous organizations that can appear impervious to outside forces. Professors lead the hiring process for their colleagues. Tenure protections provide job security. “Shared governance” traditions give the faculty broad decision-making authority. And the list of needed reforms only grows: we need to control higher-education costs, rebuild public confidence, improve the return on investment of many four-year programs, recommit to free speech and inquiry, strengthen the liberal arts and humanities, address student mental-health challenges, revive ideological diversity among faculty and staff, and much more. Given the mismatch between the scope of these problems and the perceived ability to bring about change, some would-be reformers have turned away from improving existing institutions and instead have decided to spend their time and energy creating new schools.

Though that fresh-start approach is promising, it can be resource-intensive, affect relatively few students, and have negligible influence on the broader system. Fortunately, there is a way to change the existing institutions that educate most students: through the governing boards of public colleges and universities.

Public institutions educate almost three-quarters of postsecondary students and about two-thirds of undergraduates pursuing four-year degrees.¹ A vast number of colleges and universities are four-year publics: flagships, land grants, regionals, liberal arts-focused, technology-focused, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and more. They contribute meaningfully to local and state economies and workforces, and they produce most public leaders.² All these institutions are governed by public boards that influence, and often control, a school’s most important features.

By working through the governing boards of public colleges and universities, reformers can affect most aspects of higher education and most students enrolled in higher education.

Governance in Practice

Just as a board oversees a multinational corporation, a major nonprofit, or a public housing authority, a board oversees each public institution of higher education (IHE). These boards select and hold accountable the college’s president, approve the institution’s budget, and set the school’s most important policies. Boards typically have the final say on how much students pay in tuition, which programs are offered, which degrees are awarded, which buildings are constructed, and which rules govern student conduct and tenure decisions. Though university policies, accreditation standards, and traditions prevent boards from dictating a school’s day-to-day operations, these boards establish the conditions and often the specific policies associated with operations, and they hire and fire the institution’s top executive.³

How are these boards populated? How would reform-minded individuals acquire a seat on these boards?



If a board is meant to be an independent body overseeing operations and instituting policies from the outside, its members should not come from the university community and certainly should not be beholden to the university's operational leadership. Moreover, if the board is meant to advance the public good (i.e., promote the interests of the state and its citizens), the selection process should be attuned to state leaders and public sentiment, not only the interests of the school's employees.

The good news is that this is exactly what we have.

Methodology

This paper investigates how members are selected for the governing boards of public institutions of higher education. I identified every public four-year institution in the U.S. and its governing board.

States organize their higher-education systems very differently. In some states, each public college or university has its own governing board. In some states, a board oversees a single university, though that university has several major and largely independent campuses. In some states, a single board oversees several IHEs—sometimes *all* of that state's public IHEs, and sometimes *some* of that state's public IHEs. My approach was to identify every board that oversees at least one public, four-year institution. This excludes boards that oversee only community colleges and other two-year institutions.⁴

In some states, when a governing board oversees more than one institution, each individual school might have its own subsidiary board. In these instances, that local board is typically advisory, while the central governing board possesses ultimate authority. Many states also have a higher-education “coordinating” board that works with all the state's colleges and universities (including privates). Generally, these boards do *not* have governing responsibilities.⁵ This paper considers only authoritative governing boards.⁶

Though governing boards generally have the same functions, they have different ambits. For example, several “system” boards (overseeing, in some cases, dozens of schools) represent well over 100,000 students, while other boards oversee a single small campus with a few thousand students. My results discuss the total number of students under each type of board.

The term “student”: many universities have thousands of graduate students while some have very few. IHEs can have students who are taking classes but not pursuing a degree. Some two-year schools (such as community colleges) now offer some four-year bachelor's degrees. This analysis focuses on four-year public institutions, and my results reflect each institution's 2024 total undergraduate enrollment.

Board memberships vary significantly in size. Some comprise fewer than 10 members, while others have more than 30. Moreover, boards are often populated via two or more methods. For instance, a board could have several members selected by the governor, several selected by the state's legislative leaders, one member selected by the faculty, one selected by the alumni association, several selected by current board members, and several who serve *ex officio*.⁷ Because this paper seeks to understand who controls the governing boards of public IHEs, I report, for each board, whether any method controls a majority of seats on that board.



I relied on the language of state statutes and regulations, board bylaws, and similar official documents. States change these rules from time to time; this analysis reflects policies as of 2024–25.

In total, I identified 240 public boards that met the above-stated criteria.⁸ Combined, they oversee more than 1,000 schools and campuses. The combined undergraduate enrollment of these institutions was 6.06 million students.

Findings: State Governors Matter

The primary finding of this study is that governors control the boards of most public institutions of higher education: 87% of undergraduates in four-year public institutions attend schools governed by boards of which at least a majority of their members are appointed by the state’s governor (**Figure 1**).⁹ In most of these instances, the governor appoints all, or nearly all, the members of these boards, not just a bare majority.

The next most common method is for the state legislature to appoint a majority of an IHE’s board members. But only 5% of U.S. public undergraduates attend such schools.

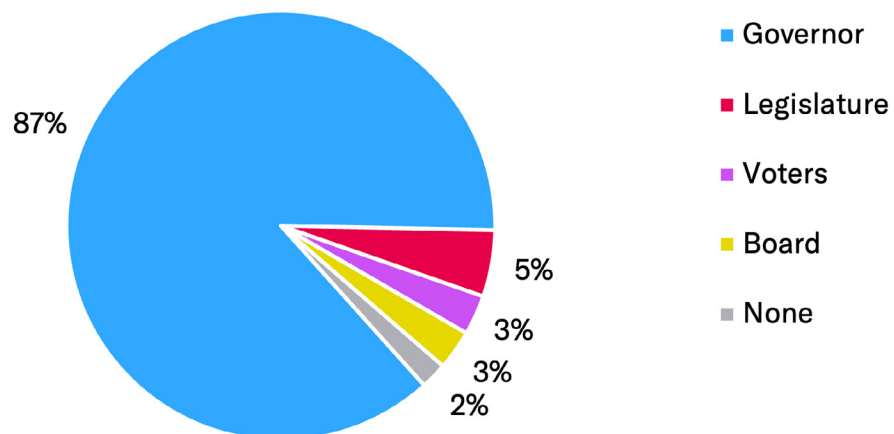
In some states, board members of public IHEs are elected by state voters; 3% of students attend these schools.

In a few instances, a public IHE has a primarily self-perpetuating board, meaning that current board members select new members when a seat opens; only 3% of students attend these schools.

About 2% of students attend schools where board members are selected in a variety of ways, such that no method controls a majority of seats.

FIGURE 1

Majority Control of Public IHE Governing Boards, by Percentage of Students



Source: Author’s analysis



State-Level Results

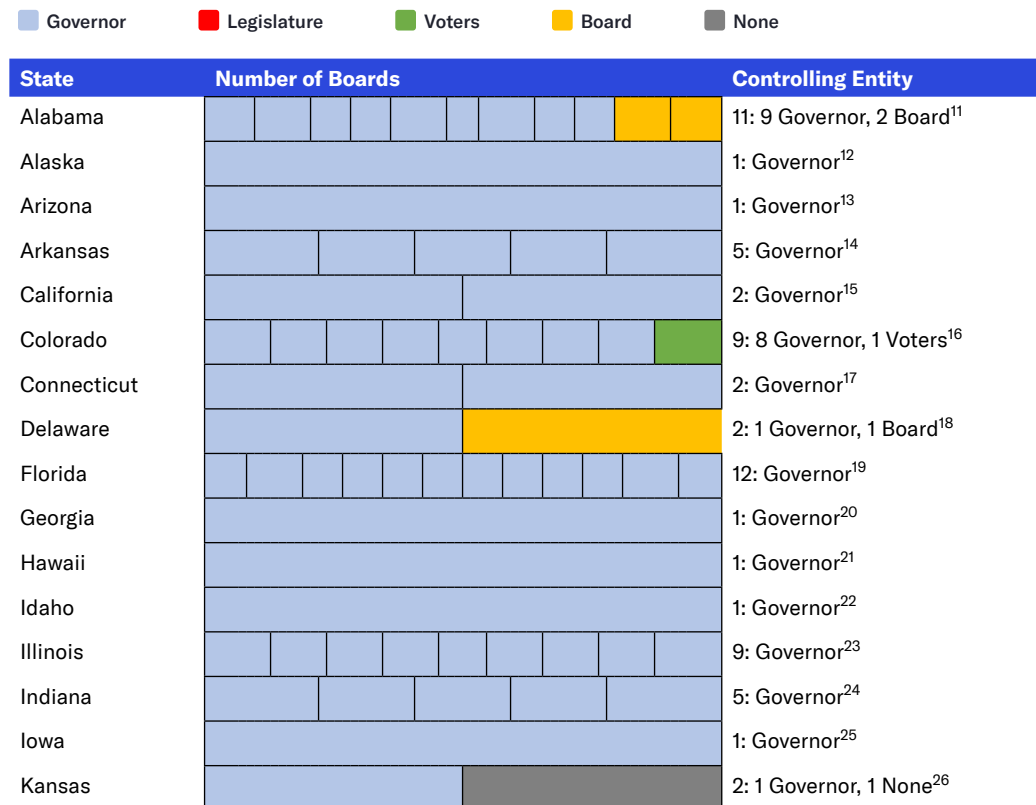
Most states have a single approach for selecting IHE board members; as a general rule, a state will employ the same method across all its public universities. In 39 states, all public IHEs have the same entity controlling their boards; and in 37 of those states, it is the governor (**Figure 2**). In Nevada, state voters control the boards of all public four-year institutions. In North Carolina, all publics are governed by a board controlled by the state legislature. In New Hampshire and Vermont, all publics have boards with no single entity controlling a majority of seats.

In most other states, the governor still controls some of the state’s public IHE boards. In Colorado, Michigan, and Nebraska, voters elect members of several important boards (i.e., University of Colorado; University of Michigan, Michigan State, and Wayne State; University of Nebraska). But in those same states, other institutions (e.g., Colorado State, Western and Central Michigan, and the three schools in the Nebraska state system) are controlled by the governor.

Similarly, in four states (Alabama, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina), at least one public IHE has a majority of board members chosen by members of the board itself. But in three of those states, at least one other public institution is controlled by the governor; i.e., in 45 states, the governor controls at least one public IHE.¹⁰

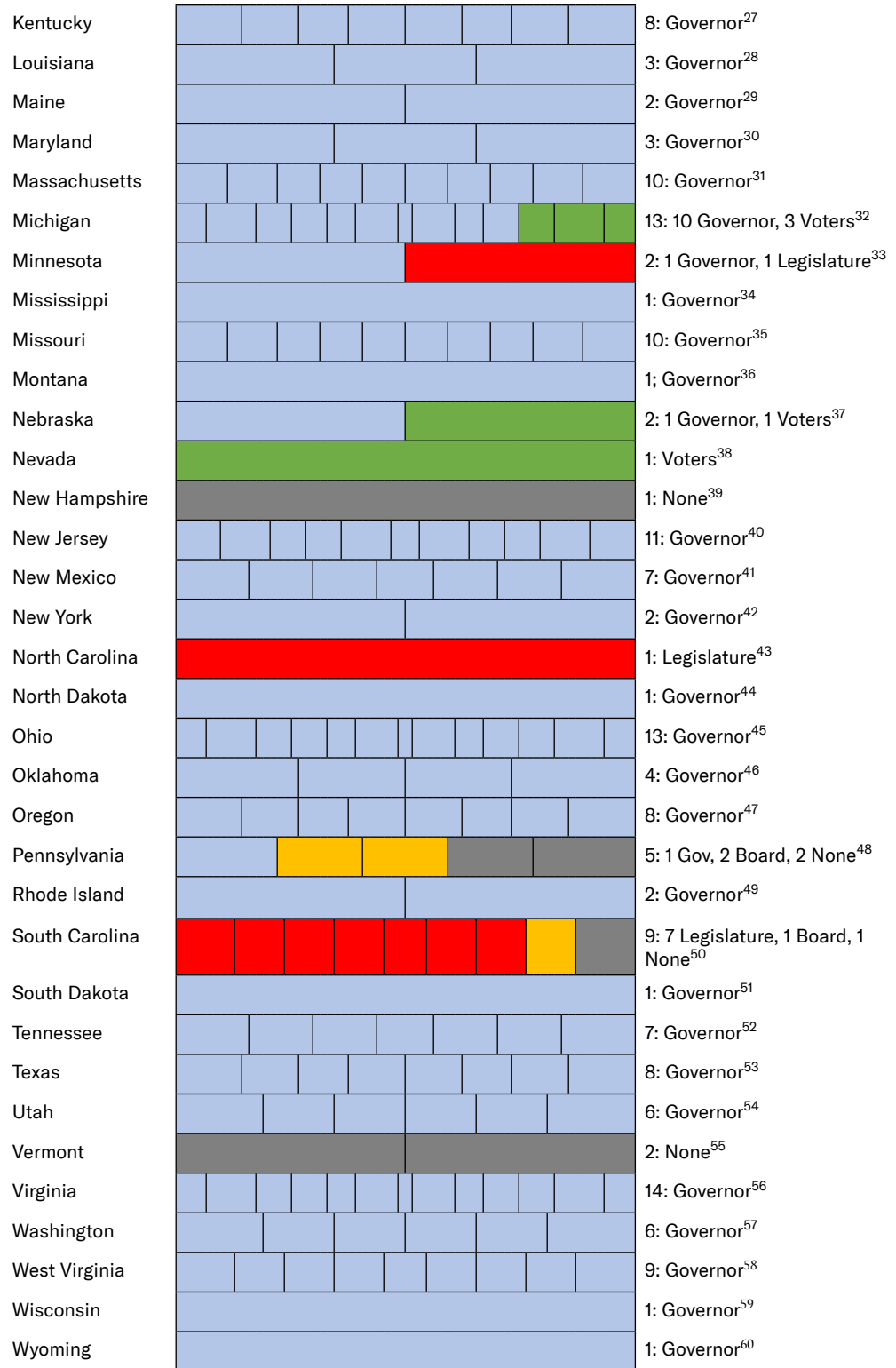
FIGURE 2

Number of Public Four-Year IHE Boards, per State and Majority Control





The Power of Governors in Public Higher-Education Reform



Source: Author's analysis



Implications and Conclusion

In recent years, as frustration has mounted against institutions of higher education, would-be reformers have invested significant resources of time, energy, and money in high-profile public-relations campaigns against campuses with the most troubling track records. Typically, these are small, elite, private universities.

Although such efforts have strengthened the case for higher-education reform and, in some cases, led to meaningful campus changes, this paper suggests a higher return-on-investment strategy. Rather than focusing on small private campuses with insulated boards and administrations, reformers should focus on public IHEs whose boards (and therefore campuses) can be changed through the gubernatorial appointment power.

This would amount to a two-step process. First, help elect reform-minded governors. Nearly two-thirds of the nation's public-college students are in states won by Trump in 2024. Governors have majority control of 112 of 134 public IHE boards in those states; by simply winning those offices, Republican governors could have majority control of the boards of schools representing 53% of undergraduates in public IHEs. If we include the boards in these conservative-leaning states that are controlled by voters and legislatures, it grows to 60% of undergraduates in public IHEs.

The second step: help these governors appoint reform-minded individuals to these boards—easier said than done. The governor must set aside the long tradition of selecting business leaders, donors, and heads of cultural institutions. The governor must decide on a reform agenda and clearly articulate its provisions. Then the administration must identify individuals who are aligned with that agenda, willing to serve, and qualified to sit on this type of board. Those individuals must make their way through the confirmation process and then learn how these boards operate.

If this process were to succeed, a majority of public-IHE undergraduates could be attending schools that support free speech and inquiry, that have greater ideological diversity among faculty and staff, and that are committed to holding down costs and ensuring every degree's return on investment.



Endnotes

- ¹ This includes two-year undergraduate, four-year undergraduate, and graduate students. Melanie Hanson, “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics,” Education Data Initiative, Mar. 17, 2025; “Current Term Enrollment Estimates,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Spring 2025.
- ² See Andy Smarick, “Publics and Place: Leadership Development by State-Run and State-Based Universities,” Manhattan Institute, Oct. 31, 2024.
- ³ For more on the challenges and opportunities facing IHE boards, see Andrew P. Morriss, “What if Universities Had Actual Trustees?” *Georgetown Journal of Law & Public Policy* 22, no. 745 (2024).
- ⁴ I cross-referenced my list with categories found in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education 2025 Public Data File. Institutions typically include privates, mixed associates (large, medium, small); profession-focused associates (large, medium, small); and mixed and profession-focused associate/baccalaureate. Those typically include publics that are baccalaureate, undergraduate/graduate-master’s, undergraduate/graduate-doctorate. Special-focus schools can be excluded or included, depending on their characteristics; e.g., public liberal arts colleges are included (generally categorized as special-focus: arts and sciences), while a public medical school would be excluded (generally categorized as special-focus: medical schools and centers).
- ⁵ In a few states, a single board has coordination and governing responsibilities. Such boards are considered only if these are the official governing boards of at least one IHE.
- ⁶ While the powers possessed by these two types of boards can vary from state to state, it is not difficult to discern which has final authority. State statutes and board bylaws are clear about the entity that hires presidents, exerts fiduciary responsibility, and so on.
- ⁷ In some cases, the governor will have a seat on one or more IHE boards. In some states, specific state leaders get a seat, such as the state’s agriculture secretary on the board of the land-grant university.
- ⁸ I exclude from the analysis the federal military academies (e.g., West Point, U.S. Naval Academy) since—although they are public—they are not part of a state’s system of higher education.
- ⁹ As with other high-ranking, state-level gubernatorially appointed officials, board members of public IHEs typically go through a legislative confirmation process.
- ¹⁰ In the following notes, I generally exclude “University of,” “University System of,” “College of,” etc., in order to save space. E.g., when a state name is used below, e.g., Alabama, Delaware, Illinois, it signifies the University of Alabama, University of Delaware, University of Illinois. In any instance where removing the extra words could create confusion, I include them; e.g., “City University of New York” for CUNY, instead of the shortened “City.”



The Power of Governors in Public Higher-Education Reform

- ¹¹ Alabama State, Athens State, Alabama A&M, North Alabama, Jacksonville State, West Alabama, Montevallo, and South Alabama use the traditional gubernatorial process. Auburn and the University of Alabama System have internal systems for selecting members. See “Article 1: The Board of Trustees,” University of Alabama System; “Constitutional Statement,” Auburn University.
- ¹² University of Alaska System.
- ¹³ Arizona Board of Regents.
- ¹⁴ Arkansas Tech, Arkansas State, Southern Arkansas, Arkansas, Central Arkansas.
- ¹⁵ California, California State.
- ¹⁶ Colorado, elected; Colorado State, appointed.
- ¹⁷ Connecticut, Connecticut State.
- ¹⁸ Delaware, majority selected by current board; Delaware State, majority selected by governor.
- ¹⁹ Florida has 12 institutional boards (trustees) and a central system board (State University System of Florida Board of Governors). Though the institutional boards are the technical owners/corporate bodies of their schools, Florida gives substantial power to the central board, including the power to appoint nearly half of each institution’s board members. Whether I considered the single board or each institutional board as the entity identified with each campus, the analysis is the same: the governor controls the governance of all public IHEs.
- ²⁰ University System of Georgia.
- ²¹ University of Hawai’i System.
- ²² Idaho State Board of Education.
- ²³ Illinois, Chicago State, Eastern Illinois, Governors State, Illinois State, Northeastern Illinois, Northern Illinois, Western Illinois, Southern Illinois.
- ²⁴ Ball State, Indiana State, Southern Indiana, Purdue, Indiana.
- ²⁵ Iowa.
- ²⁶ The Kansas State Board of Regents is gubernatorial-controlled. No single appointing authority has majority control of the unusual composition of the Washburn board. “By law, Washburn University is governed by a nine-member Board of Regents. The Governor and the Mayor of the city of Topeka each appoint three members. One is the mayor or a member of the city’s governing body. The Shawnee County Commission and the Kansas Board of Regents each appoint one member.” Washburn Board of Regents, “About the Board,” Washburn University.
- ²⁷ Kentucky, Kentucky State, Louisville, Eastern Kentucky, Morehead State, Murray State, Northern Kentucky, Western Kentucky.
- ²⁸ Louisiana State, Southern, Louisiana.



The Power of Governors in Public Higher-Education Reform

- 29 Maine Maritime Academy, Maine.
- 30 Maryland, Morgan State, St. Mary's.
- 31 Bridgewater State, Fitchburg State, Framingham State, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Salem State, Westfield State, Worcester State.
- 32 Michigan, Michigan State, and Wayne State are elected. The governor appoints Oakland, Michigan Technological, Lake Superior State, Central Michigan, Eastern Michigan, Northern Michigan, Western Michigan, Saginaw Valley State, Ferris State, Grand Valley State.
- 33 Minnesota State is appointed by the governor, while Minnesota is appointed by the state legislature.
- 34 Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning.
- 35 Missouri, Lincoln, Central Missouri, Southeast Missouri, Missouri State, Northwest Missouri, Missouri Western, Missouri Southern, Harris-Stowe, Truman.
- 36 Montana Regents of Higher Education.
- 37 Nebraska elected; Nebraska State gubernatorial.
- 38 Nevada Regents.
- 39 The University System of New Hampshire Board of Trustees has members appointed via a variety of means, such that no entity controls a majority of the board.
- 40 Rutgers, College of New Jersey, Kean, Montclair, New Jersey City, Ramapo, William Paterson, Thomas Edison, Rowan, Stockton, New Jersey Institute of Technology.
- 41 New Mexico, New Mexico Highlands, Western New Mexico, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, Northern New Mexico, New Mexico State, Eastern New Mexico.
- 42 City University of New York, State University of New York.
- 43 The responsible governing entity of the state's public institutions is the University of North Carolina Board of Governors. Each of the state's 16 publics has an institutional board, but its powers are delegated by the Board of Governors.
- 44 North Dakota State Board of Higher Education.
- 45 Akron, Bowling Green, Central State, Cleveland State, Cincinnati, Kent, Miami, Ohio, Ohio State, Shawnee, Toledo, Wright State, Youngstown State.
- 46 University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, Regional University System of Oklahoma, Oklahoma, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges.



The Power of Governors in Public Higher-Education Reform

- ⁴⁷ Oregon Health and Science University, Eastern Oregon, Oregon Institute for Technology, Oregon State, Portland State, Southern Oregon, Oregon, Western Oregon.
- ⁴⁸ Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, Temple, Pittsburgh, Lincoln, Pennsylvania State. Pennsylvania might have the most complicated system of higher-education governance in the United States. Three institutions (Temple, Pitt, Lincoln) have boards with complex, widely distributed appointment systems. The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) is governed by a gubernatorially constituted board of governors, but its institutions have boards of trustees that share in governance (see Chris Fiorentino, “The Role of Trustee in Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education,” Pennsylvania Association of Councils of Trustees, May 2025). Because of the specific powers of each, I’ve identified the PASSHE board as the ultimate governing authority (instead of the institutional boards), but the analysis would be unchanged if the institutional boards were used instead; their members are also primarily selected by the governor. The Penn State system also has a complex, widely distributed appointment system.
- ⁴⁹ University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island Council on Postsecondary Education.
- ⁵⁰ A majority of Clemson’s board members are selected by board members. The Citadel’s system leaves no single entity with majority control. The legislature has majority control over Winthrop, Coastal Carolina, Lander, Francis Marion, Charleston, South Carolina, and South Carolina State.
- ⁵¹ South Dakota.
- ⁵² Austin Peay, East Tennessee, Middle Tennessee, Tennessee State, Tennessee Technological, Memphis, Tennessee.
- ⁵³ Texas Southern, Texas Woman’s, Texas, Texas A&M, North Texas, Texas Tech, Houston, Texas State.
- ⁵⁴ Utah, Utah State, Weber, Southern Utah, Utah Valley, Utah Tech.
- ⁵⁵ The Vermont and Vermont State Colleges boards are both populated by mixed systems, leaving no single authority capable of appointing a majority.
- ⁵⁶ Virginia, Old Dominion, Christopher Newport, Virginia Commonwealth, George Mason, Mary Washington, Virginia Military Institute, Virginia Tech, Radford, James Madison, Virginia State, Norfolk State, Longwood, William and Mary.
- ⁵⁷ Washington, Washington State, Evergreen, Western Washington, Eastern Washington, Central Washington.
- ⁵⁸ Bluefield, Concord, Fairmont, Glenville, Marshall, Shepherd, West Liberty, West Virginia State, West Virginia.
- ⁵⁹ Wisconsin.
- ⁶⁰ Wyoming.