

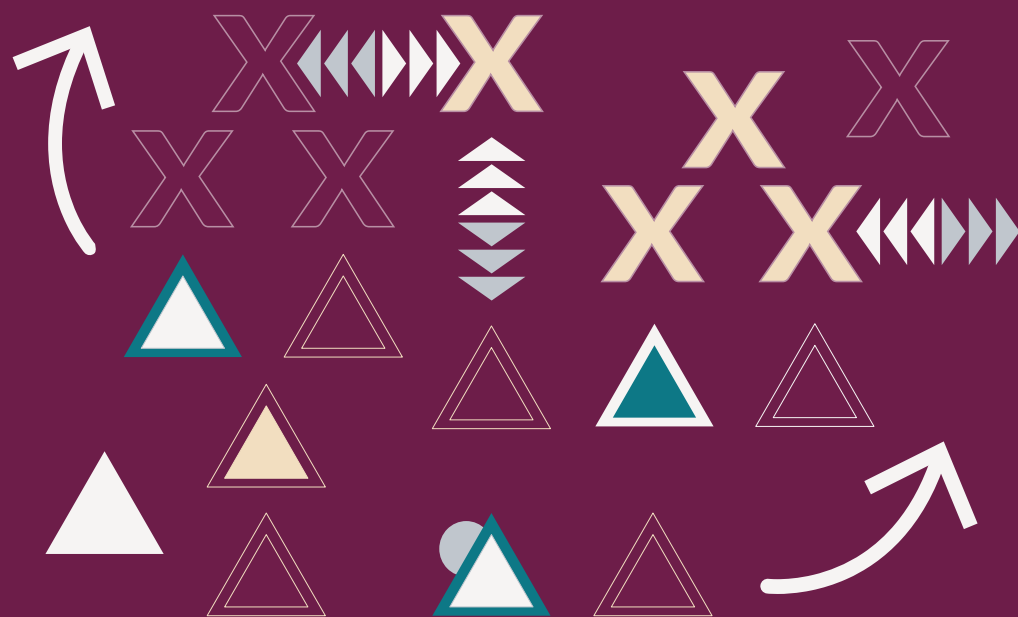


Systemic Impact

Mapping Authority in Postsecondary Systems

By Kateland Beals, Christine Wade, and Alex Cortez

DECEMBER 2025



About Systemic Impact: Mapping Authority in Postsecondary Systems

As part of Bellwether's series to support organizations pursuing Systemic Impact strategies, this publication is a companion piece to Systemic Impact: The Only Path to Scale, Success, and Sustainability and **focuses on Systemic Impact specifically within the context of postsecondary pathways**. Postsecondary-specific questions related to Systemic Impact are explored (with an emphasis on postsecondary persistence and success), including:

- Why is Systemic Impact **important** in postsecondary education?
- What are **postsecondary systems**?
- Where does **authority** lie in postsecondary systems?

This publication is not a strategy or prescription, but rather a tool to be used by organizations working in higher education to understand how authority operates within and across postsecondary systems and to inform their approach for pursuing Systemic Impact strategies.

Notes on Language: Although the sector uses the terms “Systemic Impact” and “Systems Change” interchangeably, this report anchors on “Systemic Impact” (except in direct quotes). At times, the most important Systemic Impact work is not to create a change but rather to preserve the status quo or “play defense” to preserve existing progress — to resist change that is in opposition to an organization’s agenda. Additionally, the term “postsecondary pathways” includes both degree (associate and bachelor’s degrees) and nondegree credentials. However, unless specifically stated, the main focus of this publication is on degree-granting institutions of higher education (IHEs).

Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

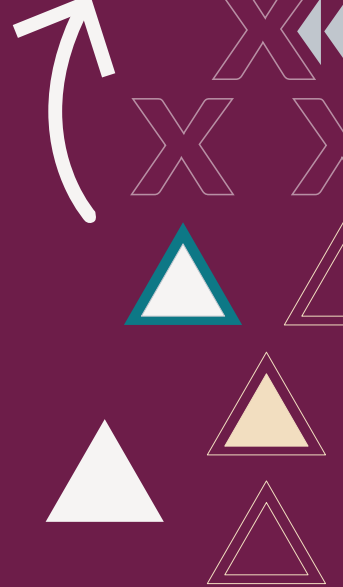
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether



Postsecondary systems across the U.S. face significant challenges. (1 of 2)

Across the country, postsecondary institutions are under increasing pressure due to financial strain, enrollment declines, shifting public perceptions about the value of college, and the growth of nondegree pathways.

Today's postsecondary students face systemic barriers that hinder persistence and completion; these include basic needs insecurity, limited support structures, and institutional practices that do not consider the everyday realities students face, the majority of whom are from low-income families, first generation, students of color, and/or nontraditional (e.g., part-time students).

As a result, even for those who complete a degree, **the return on investment (ROI) of college is uneven.**

The consequences of college noncompletion are significant, not just for students, but also for IHEs and society, contributing to lost income/revenue, talent shortages, and greater inequality, among others.

Addressing these challenges requires changing postsecondary systems.

Postsecondary systems across the U.S. face significant challenges. (2 of 2)

Consider the following set of headwinds IHEs nationwide face:

- **Enrollment has declined.*** Across the country, postsecondary enrollment has steadily declined since its peak in 2010. Additionally, falling birth rates following the Great Recession signal further decline.
- **Public confidence in conventional higher education has declined.*** Less than half (42%) of Americans have a high level of confidence in higher education, and only 52% of high school students are considering a four-year college.
- **Interest in nondegree pathways is growing.** There is bipartisan support for the expansion of nondegree pathways, and 65% of high school students say that their ideal postsecondary pathway focuses on internships and apprenticeships.
- **Funding for postsecondary education is in flux.** Policy changes are impacting borrowing for postsecondary pathways. Federal education funding is being disrupted/reduced, with threats to Pell Grants and IHE research.
- **Scrutiny over course content and policies has increased.** At the federal level and in some states, there is a rising level of directiveness toward what can be taught in education systems as well as how IHEs admit and support students.
- **IHEs face financial strain, closures, and consolidation.** In 2019, 67% of IHEs across the country missed their revenue goals; 127 private colleges and universities and 579 for-profit colleges closed or merged between 2016 and 2024.

Many of today's IHEs were not built for today's students.

Most postsecondary students are nontraditional. Today, nearly 75% of college students work while in college, do not enroll immediately after graduating from high school, are parents, and/or exhibit other attributes of nontraditional college students.

Postsecondary students struggle to meet basic needs. Nearly 60% of students experience basic needs insecurity, including food and/or housing insecurity.

Disparities exist by race, income, and first-generation status:

- Students from the highest-income quartile are nearly four times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those from the lowest-income quartile.
- White students are nearly 50% more likely to earn an associate or bachelor's degree than Hispanic or Black students.
- Continuing-generation students are twice as likely as first-generation students to earn a bachelor's degree.

The ROI for postsecondary students is uneven, often benefiting those with the largest advantages. Millions of students leave college with debt and no degree. Of those who do graduate, only 75% of bachelor's degree holders and 67% of associate degree holders will realize a positive ROI within 10 years, and 5% and 21% of students in each group, respectively, will *never* realize a positive ROI.

Barriers to postsecondary persistence and success have significant consequences for *students*.

Students who do not graduate from college face long-term negative impacts:

Lower Lifetime Earnings Individuals with only a high school diploma earn approximately \$1 million less, on average, over a lifetime than those with a bachelor's degree.

Fewer Career Opportunities Individuals without a bachelor's degree are twice as likely to be unemployed and less likely to be in higher-earning careers with greater upward mobility.

Less Social Mobility Low- and middle-income students without an associate or bachelor's degree are less likely to advance into higher income quintiles as adults.

Less Civic Engagement Individuals without a college degree are less civically engaged, voting at rates approximately 13 percentage points lower than those with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Worse Social and Health Outcomes Those without a college degree have a shorter life expectancy than those with bachelor's degrees (73.5 years compared with 84.2 years, respectively).

IHEs are negatively impacted when students do not graduate.

When students do not graduate from college, IHEs experience:

Loss of Revenue

IHEs lose approximately \$16.5 billion annually in tuition revenue due to student attrition. In states using outcomes-based funding models (also called performance-based), public colleges and universities stand to lose state appropriations.*

Reputational Harm

With graduation and retention making up 20% to 30% of overall ranking criteria, IHEs with high attrition often see their national ranking drop on influential ranking lists.

Recruitment Challenges

Student outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, employment after graduation) are a top factor that students consider when making postsecondary choices, second only to affordability.

Reduced Potential Alumni Donor Pipeline

Across the U.S., alumni donate \$13.5 billion annually. Because most alumni giving is relatively modest (25% of gifts are under \$100, and only 3% exceed \$10,000), IHEs rely on large numbers of graduates to increase their donation pipelines.

Risks to Accreditation

Persistent high student attrition rates may lead to IHEs receiving warnings or probation from their accrediting bodies.

Society suffers when students do not graduate from college.

When students do not graduate from college, society experiences:

Declining Economic Productivity

Those without a college degree typically earn less than their degree-earning peers, resulting in lower taxable income and reduced consumer spending.

Increased Public Costs

Nondegree individuals are more likely to have higher health care costs due to poor health outcomes and are more likely to need public assistance such as housing, food, and unemployment benefits.

Talent Shortages

A looming demographic cliff, including declines in college enrollment, projects a shortfall of 2.58 million workers in roles requiring a bachelor's degree by 2031.

Increased Inequality

Adults with two parents who earned, at a minimum, bachelor's degrees are four times more likely to have a bachelor's degree themselves — exacerbating income inequality between degree and nondegree holders.

How can postsecondary systems be impacted to address these challenges?



Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

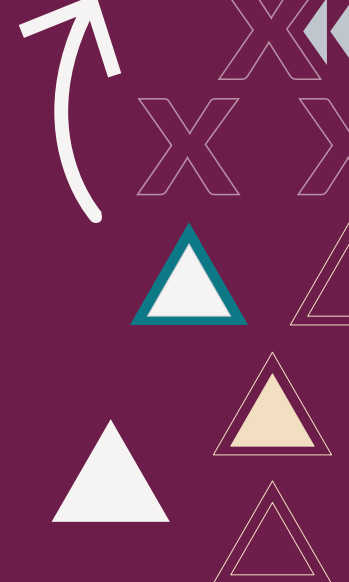
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether



Systemic Impact is one of three strategies organizations can use to address postsecondary challenges.

DIRECT IMPACT	How an organization provides programming directly to its target beneficiaries.
WIDESPREAD IMPACT	How an organization builds the capacity of partners to implement elements of its program model.
SYSTEMIC IMPACT	How an organization shifts mindsets, relationships, and power to in turn shift policies, practices, and resource flows* to create conditions for systems-level adoption of an organization's program model.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing.



Systemic Impact is critical to the scale, success, and sustainability of social change ...

Many education reform efforts ignore Systemic Impact, pursuing a “field of dreams” as their theory of change (“If you build it, they will come”).

- This often fails because systems are not wholly rational, but also political. Systems are a complex web of money, power, interests, and values that can be resistant to change.
- In addition, these efforts often do not reflect the perspectives and voices of the communities they serve, instead reflecting the values and priorities of those with privilege in positions of power.

Systemic Impact is the only way to achieve true population-level impact – it is philanthropy’s only exit strategy, and it is the ultimate in business development.

- Philanthropy by itself cannot support population-level impact.
- Social problems are owned by social systems, which can enact policy, direct funding, and implement and hold accountable changes in practice at scale.

Education systems are experiencing seismic shifts in funding and focus (e.g., federal funding shifting to states; lines blurring among K-12, postsecondary, and workforce). **An education organization does not have to be interested in systems for systems to be interested in it.**

... and yet Systemic Impact is complicated.

Systemic Impact is unapologetically about power and who controls the agenda. Power created existing policies, practices, and resource flows, and power is needed to shift them. Those with power may or may not be the same individuals/groups as those with authority to maintain or change a given policy, practice, or resource flow.

It has a long (if not eternal) timeline and is nonlinear. Systemic Impact is neither a sprint nor a marathon, but rather a commitment to walk 10,000 steps every day, frequently around the same track, and sometimes walking backwards because those with competing agendas will push back. Systemic Impact success frequently requires multiple campaigns: to achieve the change in policy, secure funding, and ensure implementation and adoption.

It also demands effective, well-designed, and well-executed campaigns. Systemic Impact requires clear insight into the desired future state, the barriers that stand in the way of that vision, the specific change (agenda) that will remove a barrier(s), and who holds authority (within the relevant system) to make the desired change.

And finally, it requires significant resources. Supporting Systemic Impact efforts over lengthy, nonlinear timelines with the capacity and skillsets needed requires meaningful (and often flexible) funding.

To take on Systemic Impact, it is important to understand the systems involved and the layers of authority and power within them.

Systems

A system is defined by:

- A set of stakeholders, their relationships, and their interactions with one another.
- A common set of processes and beliefs that guide those interactions and relationships.
- Constructs of governance where those processes and beliefs are applied.
- Power in determining what happens within those constructs of governance.

Authority

An individual or governing body responsible for decision-making. Those in authority usually are invested with specific power, but they are not the only ones who have power.

Power

This series defines power as the ability to decide an agenda and make action happen to advance that agenda. Those with power have the ability to influence the decisions made by those in authority.

This publication focuses on the *systems* and *authority* at play in higher education.

Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

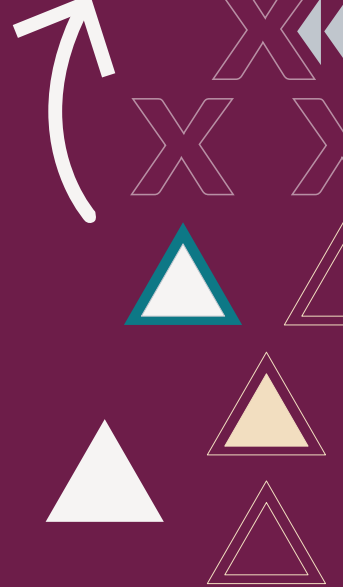
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether

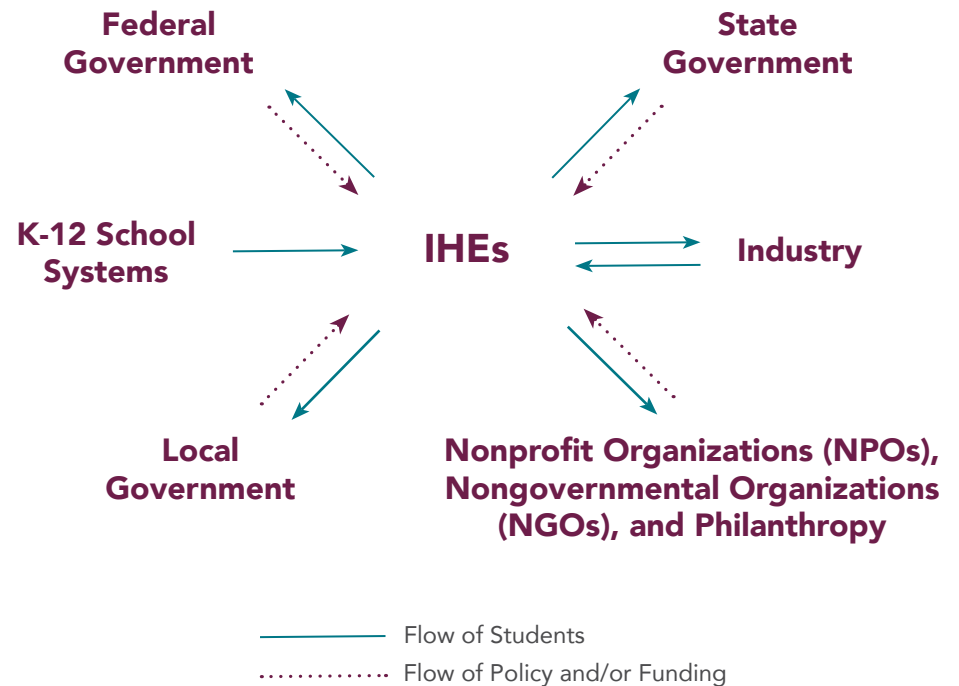


The postsecondary landscape is a complex web of systems.

The postsecondary landscape is a **complex web of interdependent systems** that influences students' postsecondary persistence and success. **Each system plays a distinct role** in shaping postsecondary access, affordability, student support, and institutional accountability.

Students interact not only with postsecondary systems, but also **with adjacent systems** such as housing, transportation, justice, and health care, which can support or hinder persistence.

Organizations interested in pursuing Systemic Impact in postsecondary contexts must account for this broader sphere of influence, recognizing that **systems often overlap and affect one another**.



Postsecondary systems are not linear, and they do not operate in isolation of one another. These systems have varying levels of power and authority over postsecondary policy and student outcomes.

Each postsecondary system plays a distinct role in impacting student persistence and outcomes.

The historic/traditional role played by each secondary system:

Federal Government	Improving access and affordability nationally and overseeing civil rights and data reporting related to postsecondary institutions.
State Government	Governing and funding public state IHEs and authorizing private institutions within a state.
Local Government	Providing infrastructure and wraparound supports that impact persistence. In some cases, funding and governing local community colleges.
IHEs	Offering degree pathways; establishing academic, financial, social-emotional learning, and career supports for students.
K-12 School Systems	Exposing students to postsecondary options, supporting the application process, and preparing students academically and socially.
Industry	Signaling workforce demands and knowledge/skill needs.
NPOs, NGOs, and Philanthropy	Catalyzing innovation, equity, and sustainability; shaping policy and practice; and filling gaps that are often unaddressed by IHEs or state and federal governments.

Pursuing postsecondary Systemic Impact also requires considering the broader ecosystem that affects students.

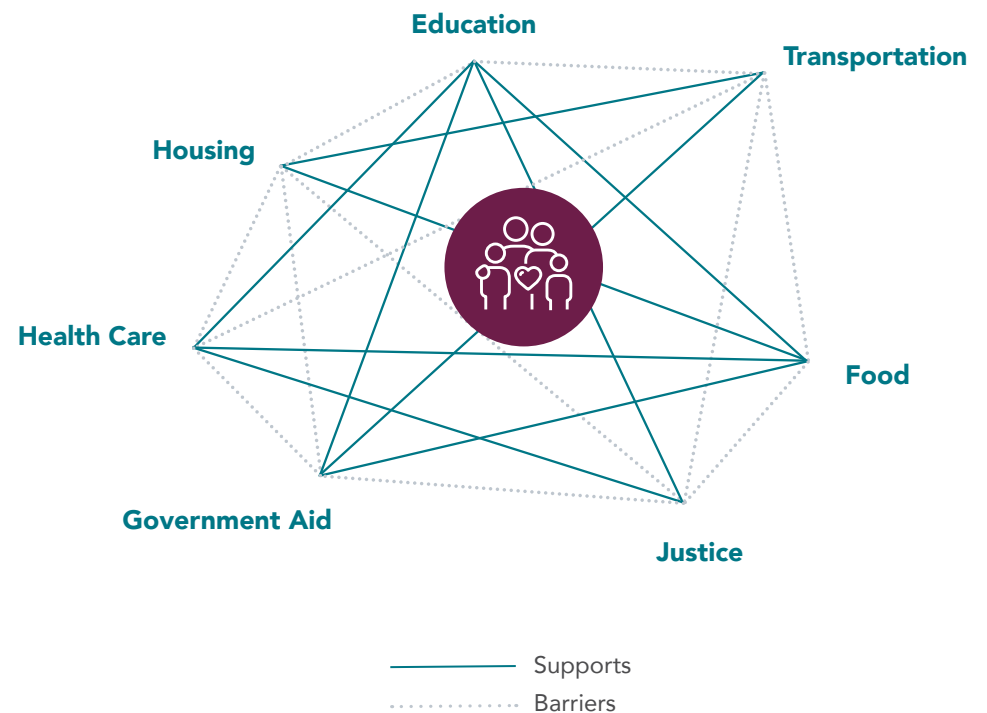
Beyond postsecondary, students interact with a number of other interconnected systems.

“In education reform, we have the privilege of creating our own siloed definition of systems — school systems. But that is not how communities experience systems. They experience an ecosystem of multiple — and often failing and oppressive — systems that overlap and impact each other.

If we want to be in service of social justice, then we also have to be responsive to that reality and respond to a community’s agenda outside of just our narrow definition of education — be it safety, food security, housing, healthcare, immigration rights and protections, economic opportunity, and/or taking on systemic racism and oppression in our social policies and civic structures.”

—ALEX CORTEZ, *SYSTEMS CHANGE & PARENT POWER*

Students experience these adjacent systems as a constellation of supports and barriers.



When adjacent systems do not work well, they impede postsecondary persistence and completion.

Examples of adjacent system-level barriers postsecondary students face (non-exhaustive):

Health Care

Lack of access to adequate health care results in poor physical and mental health. Mental health is shown to be the greatest predictor of persistence among community college students, with a negative correlation between mental health challenges and educational attainment.

Transportation

Lack of reliable transportation is a major barrier to college completion, particularly for community college students. One in eight community college students reports missing class due to transportation problems.

Food

Food insecurity affects 41% of all postsecondary students and 67% of community college students, leading to negative impacts on health and academics. Food-insecure students are more likely to report lower GPAs (2.0-2.49) compared with food-secure students' GPAs (3.5-4.0).

Housing

In an analysis of Minnesota students, housing-insecure students completed postsecondary degrees at lower rates than their housing-secure peers, with completion rates of 25%, compared with 47% for housing-secure students eligible for free and reduced-price meals (FRPL) while in high school and 73% for housing-secure non-FRPL peers.*

Justice

Individuals with criminal records face significant barriers to higher education. Formerly incarcerated people are eight times less likely to attain an associate or bachelor's degree than the general public.

Intersecting Needs: Data show that postsecondary students experiencing insecurity in one area often experience insecurity in multiple areas, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support.

Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

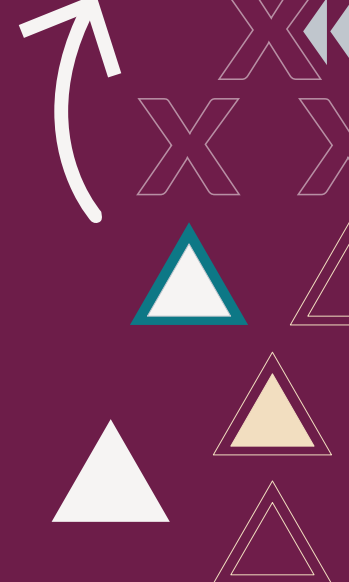
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether



Knowing where authority lies in the postsecondary ecosystem is essential.

Understanding where authority lies across postsecondary systems is essential to building power to influence those in authority to make systems-level change (or maintain the status quo). The postsecondary landscape is influenced by the **federal**, **state**, **local**, and **IHE** levels.

FEDERAL	STATE	LOCAL	IHE
The federal government influences postsecondary systems through funding (e.g., student aid, research grants), accreditation oversight, regulatory enforcement, and data reporting. Although it does not directly govern IHEs, it sets critical conditions for access to federal funds, shaping institutional priorities and accountability.	States have primary authority over public higher education in their borders, including funding, governance structures, institutional authorization, licensure, and state-level data systems. States establish policies that affect postsecondary affordability, access, and program quality and often appoint boards or commissions that oversee public IHEs.	Local governments influence postsecondary outcomes primarily through community college governance, funding (in some states), and workforce and economic development. Local governments also provide infrastructure and wraparound student supports such as transportation, housing, and public safety that directly impact student persistence and success.	IHEs hold direct authority over their academic programming, admissions, budgeting, student support, and internal governance. Authority within IHEs is distributed among trustees, presidents, provosts, faculty, administrative offices, and student leadership, while external actors (e.g., accreditors, donors, governments) have the power to shape institutional decision-making.

This section includes an overview of how authority historically has been structured across postsecondary systems, though the shifting higher education landscape means authority may not look or operate the same in the future as it has in the past.

The *federal* government has broad authority over IHEs.

Federal authority over IHEs includes:

Funding

- The federal government offers **grants and loans** as part of its student financial assistance.
- If IHEs want to be eligible to accept federal financial aid (which nearly all need for financial viability), they must **adhere to the requirements set by the federal government**.

Accreditation

- Accreditation is the **quality assurance process** to assess that academic programs are meeting minimum standards for quality.
- The federal government holds the power to **determine the agencies that are allowed to accredit IHEs**.
- IHEs must be accredited to receive federal student financial aid.

Regulatory Enforcement

- The federal government has the authority to **enforce compliance with laws** affecting IHEs, such as:
 - **The Higher Education Act**, which governs federal financial aid programs, campus safety, transparency, accreditation, student rights, and institutional accountability.
 - **Civil rights laws** like Title VI, Title IX, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504.
 - **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act** laws governing the privacy of student educational records.

Data Reporting

- The U.S. Department of Education operates the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), to which **all IHEs are required to report basic outcome data in order to receive federal student aid**.
- IHEs report data on enrollment, program completions, graduation rates, faculty and staff, institution-level finances, and student financial aid, which is then used **by policymakers** to make decisions about funding and oversight and **by consumers** to make informed choices about where (and if) to enroll in college.

The four areas of federal postsecondary authority are distributed across a number of entities. (1 of 2)

System	Key Players	Role/Authority in Postsecondary Policy	Funding	Accreditation	Data Reporting	Regulatory Enforcement
Executive Branch	Office of the President	Sets national education policy priorities and direction; issues executive orders that impact education systems; appoints key system leaders.	X			X
U.S. Department of Education	National Center for Education Statistics	Responsible for collecting, analyzing, and reporting education data, including IPEDS.			X	
	Federal Student Aid	Manages federal student aid programs, including grants, loans, and work study.	X			X
	Institute of Education Sciences	Conducts research and provides statistics on the condition of education, including postsecondary education, to inform policy and practice.	X		X	
	Office of Postsecondary Education	Develops policy, administers aid programs, and oversees initiatives to enhance postsecondary education quality and access.	X	X	X	X
	Office of Civil Rights	Enforces federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination in education programs or other activities that receive federal funds.				X
Other Federal Agencies	Federal Trade Commission	Enforces regulations in the postsecondary marketplace that protect students as consumers.				X
	National Science Foundation	Supports education and research in STEM fields through grants and initiatives aimed at enhancing postsecondary STEM education.	X		X	

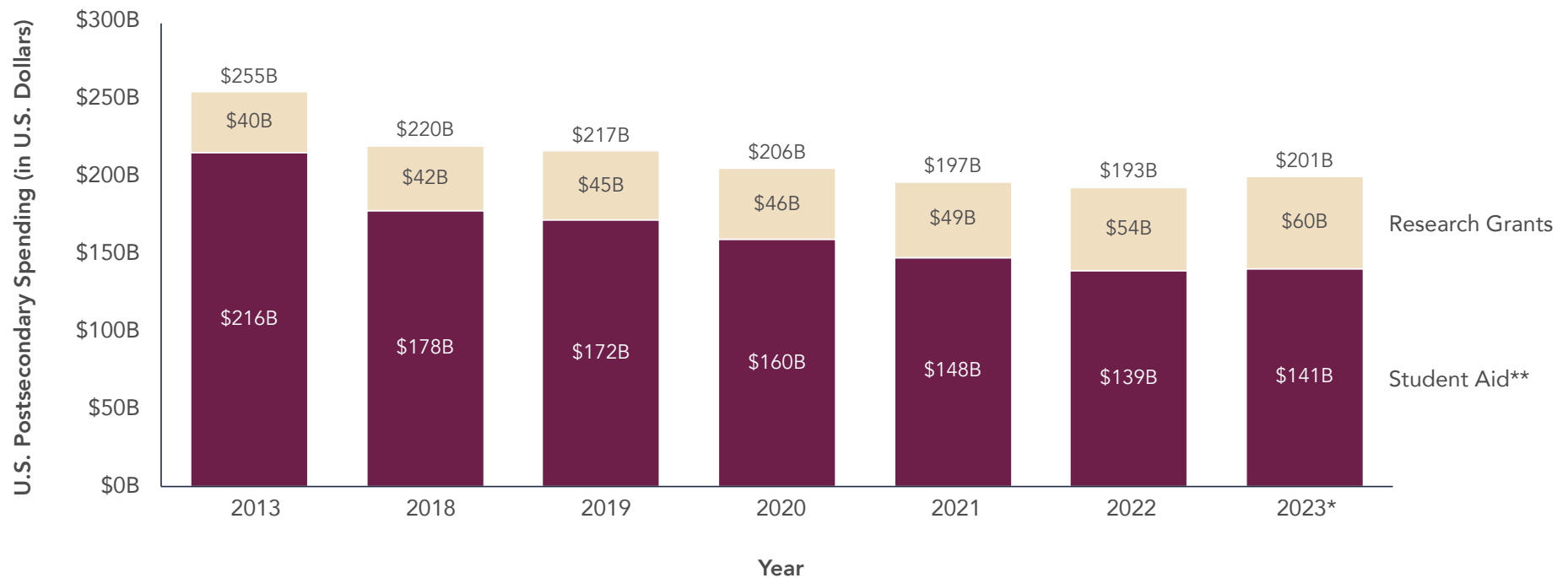
The four areas of federal postsecondary authority are distributed across a number of entities. (2 of 2)

System	Key Players	Role/Authority in Postsecondary Policy	Funding	Accreditation	Data Reporting	Regulatory Enforcement
Other Federal Agencies cont.	National Institutes of Health	Awards research grants to IHEs to fund biomedical and health-related research, support training, and advance public health.	X		X	
	Department of Labor	Collaborates with IHEs to align workforce development programs with current labor market needs, often influencing postsecondary vocational and technical education.	X			X
Legislative Bodies	U.S. Congress	Enacts laws, sets funding, and oversees education programs through key committees.	X			X
Accrediting Agencies	Council for Higher Education Accreditation	Recognizes accrediting organizations, ensuring they meet standards, which affects institutional eligibility for federal funding (an NGO).		X		X
	Regional and National Accreditors	Evaluate and accredit IHEs and programs and maintains educational quality and institutional eligibility for federal student aid.		X		X
Advisory Councils and Boards	National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity	Advises the U.S. Department of Education Secretary on matters related to accreditation and the eligibility and certification processes for IHEs.		X		

IHEs saw declining enrollment and federal funding from 2013 to 2023.

Postsecondary funding, inclusive of student financial aid and research grants to IHEs, totaled \$201 billion in 2023 — \$54 billion less than in 2013. Although federal postsecondary spending has fallen due to lower enrollment and less student aid, funding toward research grants to IHEs has grown by 50% since 2013.

U.S. Federal Postsecondary Spending, Research Grants and Student Aid, 2013-2023



*Preliminary data. **Student aid includes loans, grants, and work-study funding.

27 **Notes:** Selected years are shown to illustrate key trends. Figures for segments and totals have been rounded to the nearest billion dollar amount. Segment totals may not equal labeled totals due to rounding. Research grants and student aid are the largest sources of federal funding to IHEs; for more information on sources of federal funding for higher education, see Bellwether's [Dollars and Degrees](#).

Efforts to influence spending (where, how much) and eligibility often occur at the federal level.

The federal budget goes through a multistep approval process, with opportunities to influence spending decisions at each point:

1. President Proposes Budget to Congress

- Each year, the president may propose a detailed budget to Congress, including where to spend, how much, guidance for eligibility and implementation, new laws, and changes to laws.

2. Congress Develops Budget Resolution

- Congress drafts a high-level recommendation of how federal funds should be allocated via a budget resolution.
- The resolution may consider the president's proposed budget but is not required to.
- The House and the Senate vote to approve the resolution.

3. Congress Introduces Appropriations Bills

- The Appropriations Committee drafts 12 bills detailing how funding is distributed across federal agencies, including any restrictions or riders.

4. Congress Votes to Pass Each Appropriations Bill

- The bills must pass both the House and the Senate.

5. President Signs or Vetoes

- Ultimately, the president must approve or veto the appropriations bills, which then become law.

6. Federal Agencies Receive Funds and Set Rules for Use

- Once funding is allocated to federal agencies, each agency responsible for those funds creates detailed rules that govern how the funds can be used, who is eligible to receive them, and how compliance is monitored.

✦ Indicates where guidance around spending is outlined in the most detail.



There is a robust ecosystem of organizations engaged in federal and state-level policy and advocacy on postsecondary pathways.

NPOs, NGOs, and philanthropy play important, yet often distinct, roles in influencing postsecondary policy.

*Organization Type Role in Postsecondary Policy**

NPOs

Provide **evidence-based insights** to shape federal policy, **convene system leaders** to discuss challenges/solutions, and **influence public opinion**.

NGOs

Advocate for state-led strategies that align **federal actions with state priorities**, **elevate comparative practices** from other countries or regions, and track government commitments to higher education for the purposes of **external accountability and monitoring**.

Philanthropy

Provides strategy funding, advocacy, and partnership to influence institutional priorities and practices. Philanthropy often serves as an important **catalyst for change** by providing funding for innovative work until public dollars can take over.

State governments also have broad authority over IHEs and are the primary funders for public postsecondary institutions.

State-level authority over IHEs includes:

Funding

- States are the primary funders of public postsecondary institutions.
- States **dictate requirements to all IHEs accepting state-based financial aid.**

Authorization and Licensing

- States **grant initial and ongoing authorization** for IHEs to operate within their borders, a legal prerequisite for financial aid eligibility.
- States **set requirements for licensure**, a legal process for establishing quality standards for programs, faculty qualifications, financial stability, and facilities.

Regulatory Enforcement

- States **enforce compliance with state-specific laws** and regulations for IHEs, including investigating complaints, conducting reviews, and imposing fines or penalties for institutions out of compliance.
- Enforcement powers are often exercised through state agencies or bureaus and may involve collaboration with other state agencies (e.g., state law enforcement) and/or the state's attorney general.

Data Reporting

- States **require IHEs to submit data on enrollment, completion, finances, and other metrics** to support funding decisions, accountability, and policy development.
- States may operate **state longitudinal data systems** to monitor and track student outcomes across state-level educational institutions (and sometimes workforce).

Governance

- States **establish governance structures for public IHEs** such as coordinating boards, governing boards, or system offices; these entities oversee institutional missions, approve new programs, set tuition policies, and may appoint IHE leaders.
- Governance structures vary by state, but **states have ultimate authority over public postsecondary oversight** and strategic direction.

At the state level, governors, state legislatures, and governing boards play influential roles in shaping postsecondary policy.

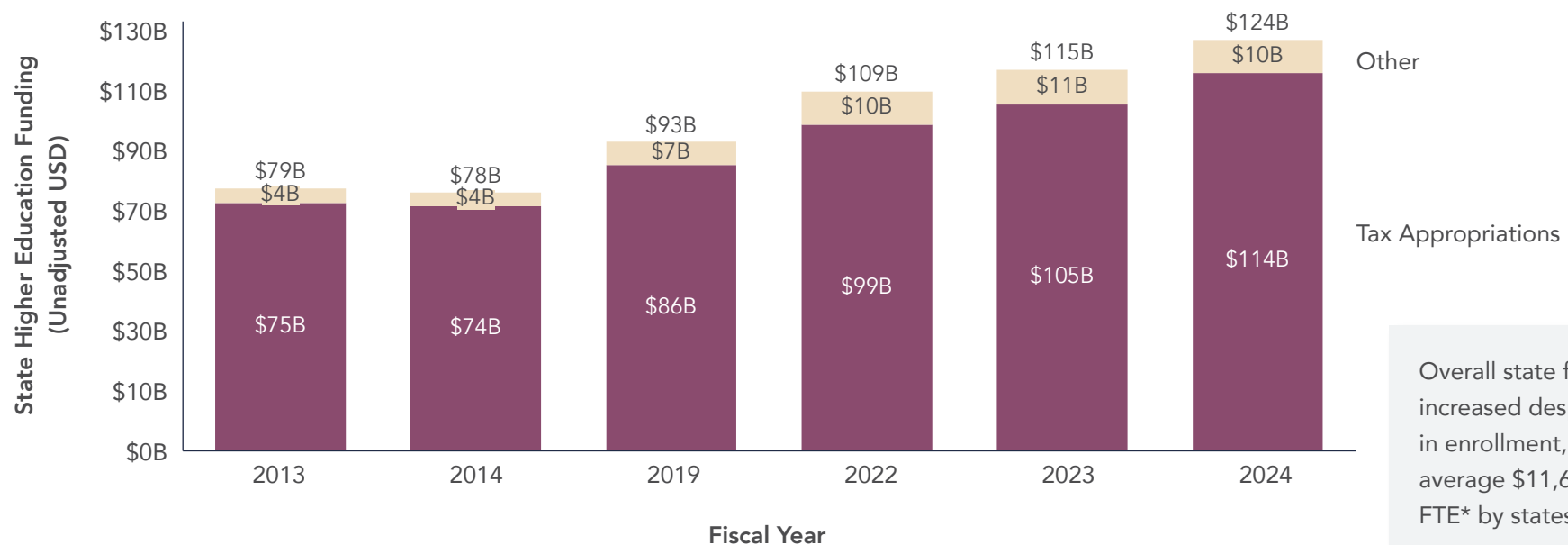
Key players and roles within state-level systems shaping postsecondary policy include:

System	Key Players	Role/Authority in Postsecondary Policy
State Government	Governor	Influences higher education policy, appoints board members, and approves budgets.
	State Legislature	Passes laws, allocates funding, and may establish education policies.
	State Higher Education Agency/Commission	Oversees statewide policy, coordination, and budget allocation for public institutions.
Governing and Coordinating Boards	State Board of Higher Education	Sets policies for public universities and colleges.
	College/University/Community College Board of Regents or Board of Trustees	Governs multi- or single-campus college, university, or community college system; appoints presidents, manages budget, oversees policies and operations of universities, colleges, or community colleges.
Public Higher Education Institutions	Public Universities	Offer undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs as state-funded research universities.
	Public Colleges	Do not offer graduate programs as state-funded entities that are often smaller than public universities.
	Community and Technical Colleges	Provide two-year degrees, workforce training, and transfer pathways to universities.
Private and For-Profit IHEs	Private For-Profit Colleges and Universities	Receive state financial aid support for students at times; subject to state regulations.
Accrediting Agencies and External Organizations	Regional Accrediting Bodies	Ensure educational quality and compliance with standards (e.g., Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Higher Learning Commission, New England Commission of Higher Education).

States' contributions to IHEs have steadily increased since fiscal year (FY) 2009.

States have consistently increased contributions to higher education since 2019 despite declines in postsecondary enrollment. States contributed nearly \$125 billion to higher education in FY24, with tax appropriations being the largest funding source.

State Higher Education Funding by Source in the U.S., Fiscal Years 2009 to 2024



*FTE stands for "Full-Time Equivalent," which expresses the combined enrollment of full-time and part-time students as the equivalent number of full-time students.

Local governments have authority over community college systems and provide infrastructure and wraparound supports.

Local authority over IHEs includes:

Funding

- Depending on the governance structure, local governments may be **complete or partial funders of local community colleges** with the authority to levy taxes to fund community colleges. *(Note: Local funding for postsecondary education varies widely by state.)*
- Some local governments provide **scholarships or financial aid** to students pursuing postsecondary education (e.g., “promise programs” or locally funded scholarship initiatives).

Workforce Development

- Local governments **staff federally mandated workforce boards** that coordinate with IHEs on credentials, apprenticeships, and job pipelines. These boards also **fund individuals to earn credentials and degrees**.
- Local governments may participate with IHEs and employers in **joint powers authorities or education commissions** to align and oversee workforce development programs.

Regulatory Enforcement

- Local governments have authority **over local zoning and land use approvals** and local **public health and infrastructure requirements** (e.g., food safety, housing standards, public parking zones, utility access).
- Local governments may provide **public safety and emergency services** (e.g., policing, fire protection, emergency response) to local IHEs and have authority over large events that spill into public places (e.g., gatherings, protests).

Governance

- Local governments **establish and/or participate in governance structures** for local community colleges, overseeing IHE budgets, policy, and leadership.
- Local governments may **have complete control** over local community college boards (either elected or appointed) or, in a hybrid or shared governance model, **may share authority with state agencies**.

Local governments play an important role in shaping the postsecondary landscape.

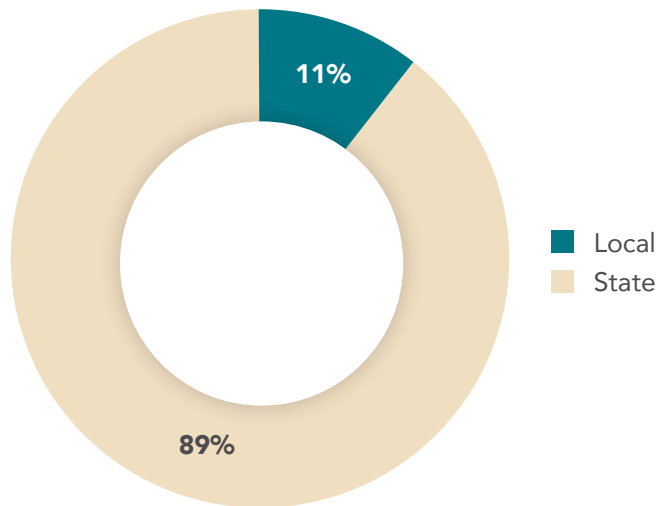
Key players and roles within local systems shaping postsecondary policy include:

System	Key Players	Role/Authority in Postsecondary Policy
Local Government	Mayor	Sets citywide strategic initiatives around postsecondary education; may allocate resources to postsecondary programs and can appoint educational leadership.
	City Department of Education or Office of Postsecondary Affairs	Funds/manages college advising, internship/apprenticeship pipelines, and/or college savings initiatives. <i>(Note: This may reside within city/county economic development departments.)</i>
	City Council or Aldermen	Approves budgets and passes ordinances that can shape or fund postsecondary initiatives.
	Workforce/Economic Development Departments	Manage city-level job training programs, employer partnerships, and adult education.
Governing Boards	Workforce Boards	Control federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds that are often used to support community college training programs, short-term credentials and certifications, and wraparound supports.
Public Education Institutions	K-12 Districts	Set college and career readiness strategy, implement postsecondary advising infrastructure, offer early postsecondary opportunities (e.g., dual enrollment, dual credit); may track postsecondary outcomes and may fund or co-fund college access and persistence programs.

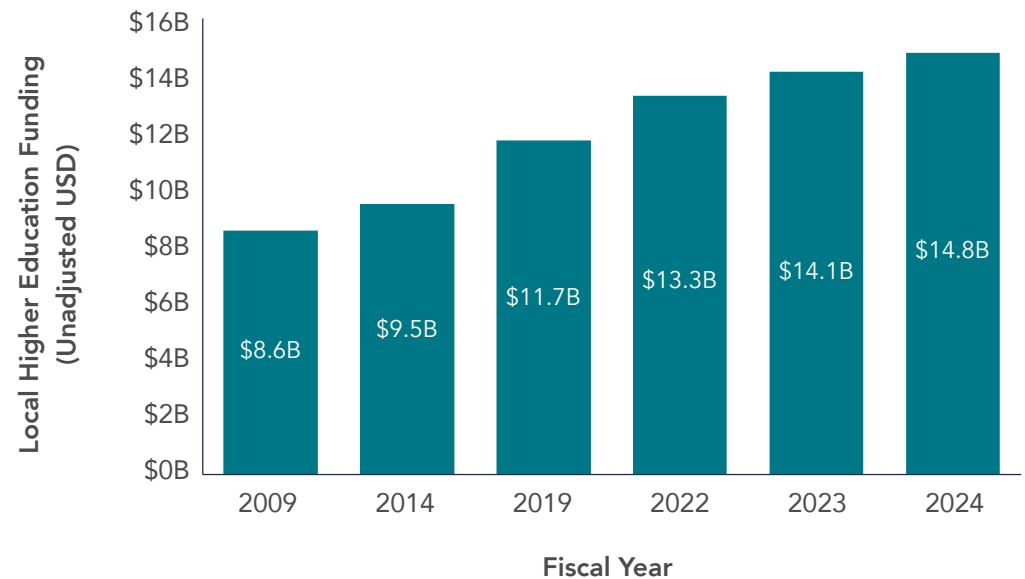
Local funding to higher education has grown over time, but local appropriations typically account for only about 10% of statewide postsecondary funding.

Local funding, the majority of which funds community colleges, has grown 72% since 2009.

State-Level Higher Education Funding in the U.S., by Source, Fiscal Year 2024



Local Higher Education Funding in the U.S., Fiscal Years 2009 to 2024



Authority over major *IHE* functions varies between public and private institutions.

	Public IHEs	Private IHEs
Funding	- Receive significant funding from state appropriations; often subject to legislative budget decisions. - Tend to have lower tuition and fees but are highly sensitive to state budget cuts. - Often constrained in how they can raise funds or set tuition, requiring state approval.	- Receive funding through tuition, endowments, philanthropy, and private grants. - Can set tuition and fees independently and allocate funds more flexibly. - Tend to have larger endowments and more freedom in investment and expenditure decision-making.
Governance	Governed by state-level boards of trustees or regents, often (but not always) appointed by the governor. - Must comply with state laws and public accountability standards.	Governed by independent boards of trustees; existing board members typically select new members. Can exercise greater discretion in internal governance without public oversight; less susceptible to political shifts. - Not agents of the state; greater operational autonomy.
Admissions	- Often have a mission to serve residents of their state and may have statutory mandates on enrollment quotas. Subject to statewide policies on access and accountability. - Typically must follow state rules on admission transparency and fair process.	Set own admissions criteria and enrollment strategies.* - Exercise greater freedom to shape the student body in line with institutional mission (e.g., religious, academic-focused). - Can adopt different policies around legacy admissions, testing, and financial aid.
Academics	Curriculum may be influenced by state or regulatory requirements. - Faculty hiring or academic program changes may require state- or board-level approval.	- Exercise greater autonomy around curriculum and academic program choices and design. Use greater discretion in faculty appointments and academic priorities.

Authority and power at the IHE level are spread across multiple groups and varies institution to institution.

Key players and roles within IHEs include:

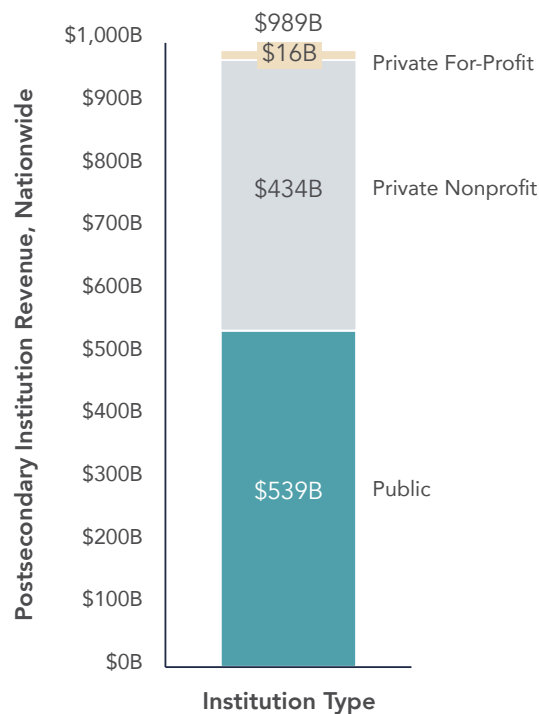
Forces	Key Players	Role/Authority in Postsecondary Policy
Institutional Leadership	Board of Trustees/Regents	Sets overall policy, approves budgets, and hires top executives.
	President/Chancellor	Responsible for institutional vision, fundraising, and operations as the top executive.
	Provost (Chief Academic Officer)	Oversees academic programs, faculty affairs, and curriculum development.
Faculty and Academic Governance	Faculty Senate	Represents faculty interests in academic policies and institutional governance.
	Faculty Unions	Represent faculty in collective bargaining with IHE administration on employment issues.
	Department Chairs/Deans	Manage academic departments and colleges within the IHE.
Student Leadership and Organizations	Student Government Association	Advocates for student interests and participates in governance.
	Graduate Student Unions	Represent graduate students, particularly regarding labor and funding issues.
Administrative Offices	Financial Office	Manages the IHE's finances, including tuition policies and endowments.
	Enrollment and Admissions Office	Oversees recruitment, admissions, and student demographics.
	Student and/or Academic Affairs Office	Develops institutional policies that shape learning and student life.
	Financial Aid Office	Manages and disburses student aid and supports access, affordability, and IHE enrollment goals.
External Forces and Stakeholders	State and Federal Governments	Regulate funding, accreditation, and compliance with laws.
	Accrediting Agencies	Ensure IHEs meet academic and operational standards.
	Alumni Donors	Provide financial support and influence institutional direction through giving and advocacy.
	Philanthropy	Shapes institutional priorities by funding targeted initiatives, programs, or reforms — often with conditions or expectations.
	Industry	Shapes academic offerings, funding priorities, and strategies to align with labor market demands.
	Athletics	Enhance student life, build school spirit, generate revenue, support enrollment, and engage alumni/donors.

Along with federal and state funding sources, IHEs have large budgets and diversification in revenue streams.

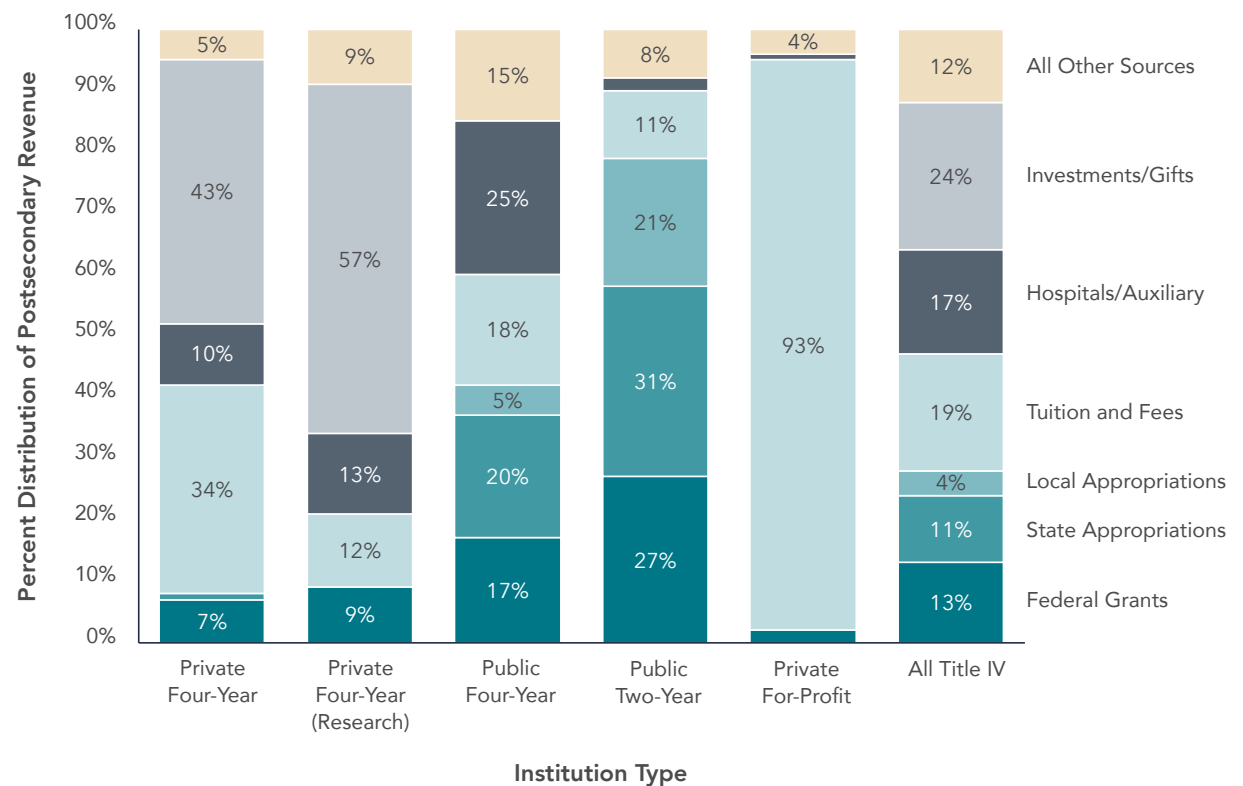
Postsecondary institutions across the country, in total, generate approximately \$1 trillion in revenue annually. The distribution of revenue varies substantially by institution type.

Revenue source composition differs substantially by IHE type, though federal, state, and local funding are typically <50% of IHE budgets.

Postsecondary Institution Revenue in the U.S., Fiscal Years 2020 to 2021



Revenue Distribution in Postsecondary, by Source of Revenue, Fiscal Year 2022

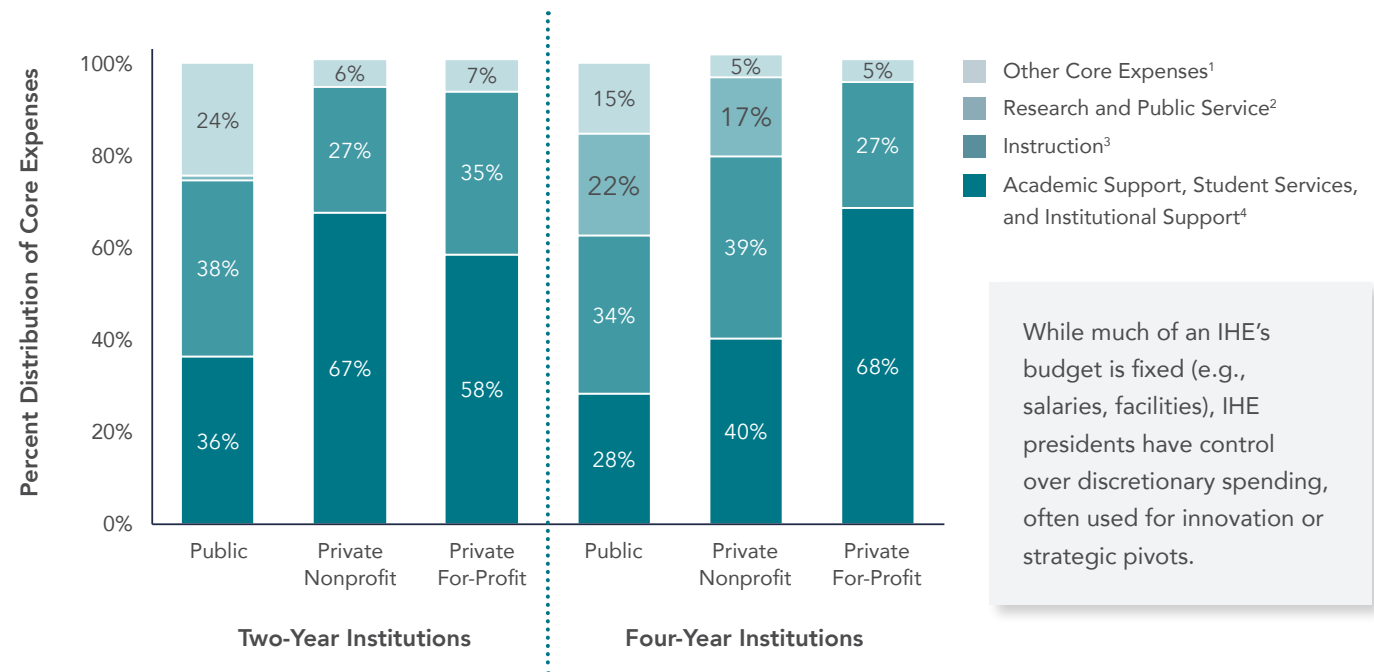


At the institutional level, IHEs have authority over the allocation of resources across instruction, research, and student support.

Key funding players:

- **Governing boards or trustees** typically have final authority over an institution's budget.
- **The president or chancellor** oversees the institution-wide budget planning process and submits a proposed budget to the governing board.
- **The chief financial officer** manages the technical preparation of the budget, working closely with academic and administrative departments to compile and analyze funding needs.
- **College deans, department chairs, and administrative units** provide input on budget needs and manage allocated funds within their domains.

Percentage Distribution of Core Expenses* for Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Level and Control of Institution and Expense Category



1) Other core expenses include net grant aid to students and other expenses. **2)** Research includes activities organized to produce research outcomes and commissioned by an agency either external to the institution or separately budgeted by an organizational unit within the institution. Public service includes expenses related to community services, public broadcasting services, and activities aimed to provide noninstructional benefit to individuals or groups external to the organization. **3)** Instruction includes expenses related to colleges, schools, departments, and other instructional divisions of the institution and expenses for departmental research and public service that are not separately budgeted. **4)** Academic support includes activities and services that support the institution's primary mission of instruction, research, and public service. Student services includes admissions, registrar activities, and activities for which the primary purpose is to contribute to students' emotional and physical well-being and to their intellectual, cultural, and social development outside formal instruction. Institutional support includes expenses for the day-to-day operational support of the institution.

Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

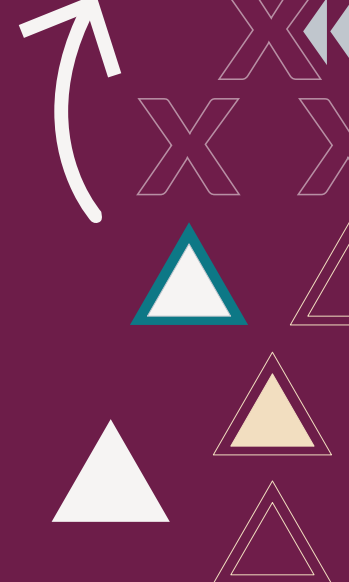
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether



Effective Systemic Impact starts with a clear understanding of the barriers students face, the systems involved, and where authority resides.

Across the U.S., postsecondary systems are at an important inflection point as they navigate pressures on enrollment, growing skepticism about value, and broader political and economic uncertainty. For postsecondary pathway students, particularly those furthest from opportunity, a wide range of barriers impacts persistence and success. If one aim of postsecondary education is to provide a pathway out of poverty, its leaders and decision-makers must design systems that support young people while they are living in it.

MORE FROM BELLWETHER

To learn more about Systemic Impact, see Bellwether's [Systemic Impact](#) series.

Changing systems, however, is complicated. Postsecondary and adjacent systems form a web of institutions, agencies, and stakeholders, with authority nested across federal, state, local, and IHE levels. These complex, layered systems with multiple authority figures make systemic issues difficult to address, yet highlight the importance of clarity and coordination.

A clear understanding of the systems involved and who holds authority for making decisions in those systems is a critical first step to developing a Systemic Impact strategy. When successful, Systemic Impact can shift policy, practice, and resource flows to remove barriers and create the conditions so that all students can succeed. ✦

Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

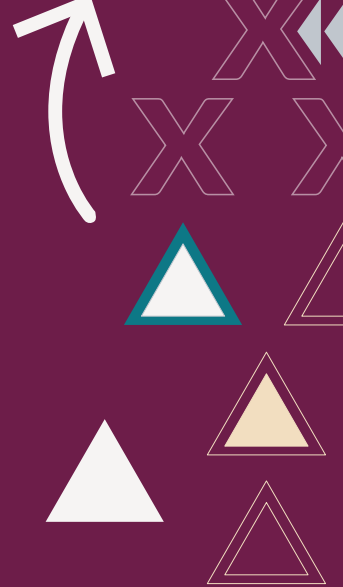
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether



Sources

PAGE 5

- “Table 303.70. Total Undergraduate Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Attendance Status, Sex of Student, and Control and Level of Institution: Selected Years, 1970 Through 2031,” Digest of Education Statistics, 2023 Tables and Figures, National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_303.70.asp.
- Kasia Lundy, Haven Ladd, and Ali Huberlie, Transitions in Higher Education: Safeguarding the Interests of Students (Ernst & Young LLP, 2018), <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/documents/EY-Parthenon%20Transitions%20in%20Higher%20Ed.pdf>.
- Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low,” Gallup, July 15, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>.
- Question the Quo: Gen Z Teens Have Changed Their Priorities for Education and Work (ECMC Group, 2023), <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/question-the-quo.pdf>.
- Non-Degree Pathways: A DC Insider’s Perspective (American Student Assistance and Jobs for the Future, 2024), https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ASA_JFF_DC-Insiders_final.pdf.
- “A Look at Trends in College Consolidation Since 2016,” Higher Ed Dive, September 16, 2025, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/how-many-colleges-and-universities-have-closed-since-2016/539379/>.
- “Table 317.10. Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Control and Level of Institution: Selected Academic Years, 1949-50 Through 2022-23,” Digest of Education Statistics, 2023 Tables and Figures, National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_317.10.asp.
- Katharine Meyer, “Pell Grant Cuts Threaten State College Access Goals,” Brookings, June 5, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pell-grant-cuts-threaten-state-college-access-goals/>.
- “Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2025,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, May 22, 2025, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>; Jones, “U.S. Public Trust.”

PAGE 6

- “Today’s Students,” Today’s Students Coalition, <https://higherlearningadvocates.org/policy/todays-students/>.
- “Today’s Students,” Lumina Foundation, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/campaign/todays-student/>.
- Michael Itzkowitz, “Which College Programs Give Students the Best Bang for Their Buck?,” Third Way, August 13, 2021, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/which-college-programs-give-students-the-best-bang-for-their-buck>.
- “Current Term Enrollment Estimates (CTEE) Expanded Edition: Fall 2022 Enrollment Overview,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Tableau Public, updated February 1, 2023, https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/researchcenter/viz/CTEE_Fall2022_Report/CTEEFalldashboard.
- The Hope Center 2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey Report (The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs at Temple University, 2025), <https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey/2023-2024-student-basic-needs-survey-report>.
- #RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021), <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/real-college-2021.pdf>.

PAGE 7

- Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah, The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2011), <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2011/collegepayoff.pdf>.
- “How Does a College Degree Improve Graduates’ Employment and Earnings Potential?,” Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities, <https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/publicvalues/employment-earnings/>.
- Sarah Reber and Chenoah Sinclair, Opportunity Engines: Middle-Class Mobility in Higher Education (Brookings, 2020), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Opportunity-Engines_Final.pdf.

- Daniel A. Cox and Sam Pressler, *Disconnected: The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life* (Survey Center on American Life, 2024), <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/disconnected-places-and-spaces/>.
- Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Accounting for the Widening Mortality Gap Between American Adults with and Without a BA,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, BPEA Conference Draft, September 28-29, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/1_Case-Deaton_unembargoed.pdf.

PAGE 8

- Neal Raisman, *The Cost of College Attrition at Four-Year Colleges & Universities: An Analysis of 1669 US Institutions* (Educational Policy Institute, 2013), https://educationalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/1302_PolicyPerspectives-1.pdf.
- Eric Brooks, “How U.S. News Calculated the 2026 Best Colleges Rankings,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 22, 2025, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings>.
- Lyss Welding, “Students’ Top Factors in College Choice and Admissions: 2023,” *BestColleges*, updated February 5, 2025, <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/top-factors-college-choice-admissions-survey/>.
- “Giving to U.S. Colleges and Universities Increased 12.5% in Fiscal Year 2022,” *Council for Advancement and Support of Education*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.case.org/resources/giving-us-colleges-and-universities-increased-125-fiscal-year-2022>.
- “HLC Requirements and Policies,” *Higher Learning Commission*, <https://www.hlcommission.org/accreditation/policies/>.
- Sophia Laderman et al., *State Approaches to Base Funding for Public Colleges and Universities* (SHEEO and NCHEMS, 2022), https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/SHEEO_2022_State_Approaches_Base_Funding.pdf.

PAGE 9

- Richard Fry, *First-Generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes* (Pew Research Center, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/05/18/first-generation-college-graduates-lag-behind-their-peers-on-key-economic-outcomes/>.

- Jacob Lockwood and Douglas Webber, “Non-Completion, Student Debt, and Financial Well-Being: Evidence from the Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking,” *FEDS Notes*, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, August 21, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.17016/2380-7172.3371>.
- Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, and Michael C. Quinn, *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements Through 2031* (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-National-Report.pdf>.

- Cox and Pressler, *Disconnected*.

PAGE 12

- Alex Cortez and Christine Wade, *A Pragmatic Playbook for Impact: Direct, Widespread, and Systemic* (Bellwether, 2022), <https://bellwether.org/publications/pragmatic-playbook-for-impact/>.

PAGE 13

- Cortez and Wade, *Pragmatic Playbook*.

PAGE 14

- Cortez and Wade, *Pragmatic Playbook*.

PAGE 15

- Cortez and Wade, *Pragmatic Playbook*.

PAGE 19

- “Office of Postsecondary Education - Program Guide,” U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, last reviewed July 9, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ope/office-of-postsecondary-education--program-guide>.
- Tomás Monarrez, Fernando Hernandez-Lepe, and Macy Rainer, *Impact of State Higher Education Finance on Attainment* (Urban Institute, 2021), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/impact-state-higher-education-finance-attainment>.
- Alexandria Walton Radford et al., *Industry-Led Postsecondary Partnerships* (American Institutes for Research, 2023), <https://www.air.org/project/industry-led-postsecondary-partnerships>.

- TICAS 2025 Federal Policy Agenda (The Institute for College Access & Success, 2025), <https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025-TICAS-Federal-Policy-Agenda.pdf>.

PAGE 20

- Alex Cortez, Systems Change & Parent Power (New Profit, 2020), <https://newprofit.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Parent-Power-and-Systems-Change-in-Education-VF-New-Profit-2020.pdf>.

PAGE 21

- Sade Bonilla and Veronica Minaya, “Challenges and Opportunity: An Examination of Barriers to Postsecondary Academic Success,” EdWorkingPaper No. 24-925 (Annenberg Institute at Brown University, March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.26300/0cw6-fe07>.
- Advancing Transportation Solutions for Community College Students (The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs, Temple University, 2025), <https://hope.temple.edu/cuny-transportation-solutions-community-college>.
- Hope Center, 2023-2024 Student Basic Needs.
- Meredith Fergus, Nichole Sorenson, Alexandra Cheatham, and Stephen Rogness, The Impact of Housing Insecurity on Educational Outcomes (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2018), https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/pdf/Impact_Housing_Insecurity_&_Educational_Outcomes.pdf.
- Lucius Couloute, “Getting Back on Course: Educational Exclusion and Attainment Among Formerly Incarcerated People,” press release, Prison Policy Initiative, October 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html>.

PAGE 24

- John Bellaire, Krista Kaput, Sharmila Mann, and Nick Lee, Quality Counts: An Overview of Postsecondary Quality Assurance Structures in the United States (Bellwether, 2024), <https://bellwether.org/publications/quality-counts/>.
- Wesley Whistle, How Higher Education Data Reporting Is Both Burdensome AND Inadequate (Third Way, 2017), <https://www.thirdway.org/report/how-higher-education-data-reporting-is-both-burdensome-and-inadequate>.
- “About IPEDS,” Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/about-ipeds>.

PAGES 25-26

- “Welcome to OPE,” Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ope>.
- NSF FY 2025 Budget Request to Congress (National Science Foundation), https://nsf.gov-resources.nsf.gov/files/01_fy2025.pdf?VersionId=knPNtniWAYGCoAYZm.6L2GKK75_OJh1o.
- FY 2024 Department of Labor Budget in Brief (Department of Labor), https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/budget/pdfs/FY2024BIB_ETAs.pdf.

PAGE 27

- Linea Harding and Nick Lee, “How Do Federal Resources Support Higher Education Funding and Equity?,” Dollars and Degrees #3, Bellwether, April 2024, <https://bellwether.org/publications/dollars-and-degrees/>.
- Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Meghan Oster, Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2024 (College Board, 2024), <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-in-College-Pricing-and-Student-Aid-2024-ADA.pdf>.
- Michael T. Gibbons, Higher Education R&D Expenditures Increased 11.2%, Exceeded \$108 Billion in FY 2023, NSF 25-313 (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, U.S. National Science Foundation, 2024), <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf25313>.
- College Board, “Trends in Student Aid 2024,” presentation, October 2024, <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-Student-Aid-2024-presentation.pdf>.

PAGE 28

- Introduction to the Federal Budget Process. (2025, November 13). <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46240>.

PAGE 30

- Sarah Pingel, “How Do States Fund Postsecondary Education?,” EdNote (blog), August 3, 2020, <https://www.ecs.org/how-do-states-fund-postsecondary-education/>.
- “State Authorization Research Projects,” State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, <https://sheeo.org/state-authorization-research-projects/>.

- “State Authorization,” Issue Briefs, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, <https://www.naicu.edu/policy-advocacy/issue-briefs/issue-briefs/state-authorization/>.
- “Issue Paper 2: State Authorization,” Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, Session 1: January 8-11, 2024, <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2023/program-integrity-and-institutional-quality-session-1-issue-paper-state-authorization-final.pdf>.

PAGE 31

- Tom Harnisch et al., State Priorities for Higher Education in 2024 (SHEEO, 2024), <https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Policy-Issue-Survey.2024.pdf>.

PAGE 32

- “Sources and Uses of State Funding,” State Higher Education (SHEF) Report (SHEEO, 2025), https://shef.sheeo.org/report/?report_page=sources-and-uses-of-state-funding#sources-of-state-funding.

PAGE 33

- Marcella Bombardieri, Tapping Local Support to Strengthen Community Colleges (Center for American Progress, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/tapping-local-support-strengthen-community-colleges/>.
- 20 C.F.R. § 679 (2025), <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-20/chapter-V/part-679/subpart-C>.
- Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students, 2013), https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/emergency-operations-plans_institution-higher-education.pdf.

PAGE 34

- Kristi DePaul, Modernizing Postsecondary Policy to Better Support Adult Learners (Inside Higher Ed and Ascendium, 2023), <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Modernizing-Postsecondary-Policy-to-Better-Support-Adult-Learners.pdf>.
- Jessica Colorado, Carrie Klein, and Christina Whitfield, Communities of Practice: Aligning K-12 and Postsecondary Education (SHEEO, 2022), https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SHEEO_COP_K12Postsecondary.pdf.

PAGE 35

- SHEEO, “Sources and Uses.”

PAGE 36

- Kathy Johnson Bowles, “Who and What Is ‘The Administration’?,” Just Explain It to Me!, Inside Higher Ed, January 24, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-explain-it-me/who-and-what-%E2%80%98-administration%E2%80%99-university>.
- “Public vs. Private Colleges: Is There a Difference?,” Impact Advisors Group, <https://impactadvisorsgroup.com/public-private-colleges/>.
- Shivani Mani, “Public vs. Private Universities in the US: Key Differences,” GradRight, January 19, 2025, <https://gradright.com/public-vs-private-universities-in-the-us-key-differences/>.

PAGE 37

- “Campus Governance Leaders Toolkit,” What Is SUNY?, SUNY: The State University of New York, <https://www.suny.edu/about/shared-governance/sunyvoices/cgl-toolkit/shared-governance/>.

PAGE 38

- “Postsecondary Institution Revenues,” in Condition of Education (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cud>.
- Lindsay Leasor and Kevin Stange, “Higher Education Finance- Expenditures and Costs,” in Live Handbook of Education Policy Research, ed. Douglas Harris (Association for Education Finance and Policy, 2025), <https://livehandbook.org/higher-education/college-finance-resources/higher-education-finance-expenditures-and-costs/>.

PAGE 39

- “Fast Facts,” National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=75>.

Contents

What's at Stake in Postsecondary Pathways?

Introduction to Systemic Impact and Why It's Important

What Are Postsecondary Systems?

Where Does Authority Lie in Postsecondary Systems?

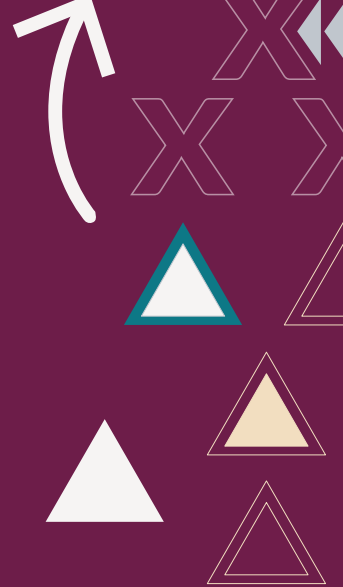
Conclusion

Sources

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

About Bellwether



About the Authors



KATELAND BEALS

Kateland Beals is a senior consultant at Bellwether. She can be reached at kateland.beals@bellwether.org.



CHRISTINE WADE

Christine Wade is a senior associate partner at Bellwether. She can be reached at christine.wade@bellwether.org.



ALEX CORTEZ

Alex Cortez is a partner at Bellwether. He can be reached at alex.cortez@bellwether.org.

About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that works to transform education to ensure young people — especially those furthest from opportunity — achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we help mission-driven partners accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and bring leaders together to drive change on education's most pressing challenges. For more, visit bellwether.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many experts who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work, including interviewees for their time, insights, and expertise as well as the community of practice participants who contributed to this publication.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleagues Mark Baxter and Nick Lee for their input and Octavia Larbi for her support. Thank you to Amy Ribock, Kate Stein, Andy Jacob, McKenzie Maxson, Temim Fruchter, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work, and to Super Copy Editors.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.



© 2025 Bellwether

- © This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits noncommercial reuse of content when proper attribution is provided. This means you are free to copy, display, and distribute this work, or include content from this report in derivative works, under the following conditions:
- ① **Attribution.** You must clearly attribute the work to Bellwether and provide a link back to the publication at www.bellwether.org.
 - ② **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from Bellwether.
 - ③ **Share Alike.** If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit www.creativecommons.org. If you have any questions about citing or reusing Bellwether content, please contact us.