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# NORTH CAROLINA LEGISLATURE MAKES HIGHER ED REFORM A PRIORITY

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By [Jane S. Shaw](#)

The North Carolina legislature is making changes to the state's higher education system.



About one-tenth of the state's budget goes to the system of 16 public universities. Recent legislative actions have not been as extensive as in K-12, where the legislature has introduced merit pay, reduced tenure, and expanded school choice, but they are disrupting a university system that observers say has been complacent.

Since 2012, when Republicans gained majorities in both houses of the state legislature and took the executive mansion for four years, the state has enacted laws protecting free speech and students' due process, cutting tuition, and streamlining university governance.

### **Free Speech Protections**

After several [incidents around the nation](#) in which student protests forced speakers offstage, the legislature passed a law in 2017 requiring campuses to protect free speech and instructing them to punish students who prevent others from speaking.

A 2013 law gives students the right to a lawyer if charged with nonacademic offenses, and in 2015 the legislature stopped funding the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Founded by former Democratic vice-presidential candidate John Edwards, the center was, in the view of the legislative majority, excessively partisan and nonacademic.

### **Tuition Cuts**

On the financial side, the legislature lowered in-state tuition to \$500 a semester at three campuses which had been losing students to neighboring South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. The lower tuition begins in the fall of 2018, and applications for admission have already increased in anticipation of lower costs.

In another dramatic move to reduce tuition and expand access, the state began a partnership with Western Governors University, a nonprofit online school that [charges about \\$6,000 a year](#). WGU North Carolina expands students' educational opportunities and provides competition to brick-and-mortar schools.

### **Governance Reforms**

In 2017, the legislature began increasing the efficiency of the university system's governing body, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Governors. It is gradually reducing membership from 32 to 24 people and is choosing more reform-minded members.

The board has taken on several controversial tasks. It stripped away the ability of UNC–Chapel Hill's Center for Civil Rights to sue other state bodies. It did this by requiring all campus centers to be academic, not political.

Working with UNC system president Margaret Spellings, a former U.S. secretary of education, the board is considering how to bring greater diversity of opinion to UNC campuses. Board members have visited the [James Madison Center for American Ideals and Institutions](#), an openly conservative Princeton University center that engages students in active discussion and debate with those holding other perspectives.

### **'A Very Welcome Change'**

Jenna Robinson, president of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says the reforms are necessary and positive.

"The legislature has made steady progress in improving public universities in North Carolina," Robinson said. "Taken together, various policy changes have put the UNC system on a solid footing for the future."

Reformers on the UNC Board of Governors have been willing to take on hard issues, including politicization on campus. It's a very welcome change.”

### **‘All Steps in the Right Direction’**

Robert Luebke, director of policy for the Civitas Institute in North Carolina, says he sees the reforms as real progress.

“Legislation protecting free speech on campus, student due process, and providing members of the Board of Governors with funds to hire their own staff are all steps in the right direction, as were the state’s efforts to bring Western Governors University, with its emphasis on competency-based learning, to North Carolina,” Luebke said.

### **‘Status Quo Is Not Good Enough’**

Jay Schalin, director of policy analysis at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says he’s especially pleased the legislature is challenging leftist partisanship on the flagship campus, UNC–Chapel Hill.

“[The legislation is] driven by the wave of conservative, patriotic populism sweeping much of the country,” Schalin said. “The new populist electorate is angered and disgusted by what has been going on with our universities, and the status quo is not good enough for them.

“They are aggressive, loud, and won’t back down,” Schalin said.

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