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State Higher Education
Executive Officers Association

State Priorities for Higher Education in 2024

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The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) serves the executives of statewide governing, policy, and coordinating boards of postsecondary education and their staffs. Founded in 1954, SHEEO is celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2024. SHEEO promotes an environment that values higher education and its role in ensuring the equitable education of all Americans, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic factors. Together with its members, SHEEO aims to achieve this vision by equipping state higher education executive officers and their staffs with the tools to effectively advance the value of higher education, promoting public policies and academic practices that enable all Americans to achieve success in the 21st century, and serving as an advocate for state higher education leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Public higher education leaders have entered 2024 aided by tailwinds of fiscal stability in many states and a strong national economy, but some challenges of the post-pandemic era remain, including strengthening the value proposition of higher education, building public trust, and meeting changing economic and workforce needs. While the 2024 presidential race and control of Congress will likely dominate headlines this year, states will continue to make important policy decisions affecting higher education. State higher education agencies and systems will play a key role in developing, implementing, and scaling policies to accelerate progress toward meeting state educational attainment goals.

The budgetary news in many states remains positive heading into 2024 legislative sessions, with continued surpluses and robust reserve funds. The sustainability of these surpluses, however, remains an open question. Diminishing federal relief funds, combined with sharp state tax cuts and growing needs for investments across state government will put pressure on many state budgets in the year ahead. According to Moody's, tax revenue growth in 2024 will be "modest" due to lower revenues from capital gains, resource extraction, and sales taxes, and predicted budget stability could change based on economic conditions.¹ While many states will not pass budgets this year—20 states are on biennial cycles—lawmakers will be watching tax revenues closely heading into 2025.

At the campus level, public college and university leaders face a host of financial pressures, including calls to boost salaries and wages to keep pace with inflation, higher interest rates, aging infrastructure, and a need to control tuition prices. Pressures on campus bottom lines are coupled with renewed calls to meet student basic needs, invest in student success programs, and adjust program offerings and instructional delivery models to meet market demands. While campus leaders throughout the country confront these macro-level challenges, their financial outlooks increasingly diverge based on enrollment demand, revenue diversity, and institutional resources.²

Politically, higher education will likely continue to face questions over relevance and value, along with more bills and messaging on hot-button issues heading into the 2024 election cycle. At the state level, the 2024 election is unlikely to change the balance of power in most states. In November, 11 state gubernatorial seats will be up for election, along with two territories. Of the 11 seats, political analysts currently predict that only a few of these will be truly competitive. While many legislative seats will be up for election, party control is unlikely to change in most legislative chambers. Nearly 40 states today are either fully "red" or "blue" and the 2024 election is not expected to fundamentally change those dynamics.

There are also many unknowns for higher education as 2024 begins. A major wild card over the next year will be the delayed roll out of the redesigned Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which could potentially be a drag on campus enrollment. The continued dysfunction in Congress and threat of government shutdowns also looms as a possible concern. Federal regulatory changes, including those pertaining to Title IX, will also be unveiled in the months ahead. Lastly, the response of college leaders to domestic and international events, including addressing student free speech and campus safety concerns, will also be watched closely by policymakers and the public as the year unfolds.

The purpose of this paper is to present the top state policy priorities for 2024 based on a survey of members of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). This paper is not an exhaustive list of state higher education policy issues for 2024 but represents those most likely to affect state higher education communities in the year ahead. Additional information and context for these issues and trends has been provided through scans of state legislative activity, policy reports, and news articles.

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1. Moody's (2023, December). *2024 Outlook - Stable with slow revenue gains balanced by strong fiscal management*. https://www.moody.com/research/States-US-2024-Outlook-Stable-with-slow-revenue-gains-Outlook--PBC_1379518
 2. Wadhvani, E., Edwards-Stimola, G. & Longitnotti-Buitoni, M. (2023, December). *U.S. higher education outlook 2024*. Fitch Ratings. <https://www.fitchratings.com/redirect/?q=/site/re/10253859>.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

This paper provides insight into state policy priorities and concerns for higher education in 2024 through a survey of members of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) during the first half of November 2023. The team at SHEEO compiled 25 policy issues based on a variety of factors:

- The prior year's [State Priorities for Higher Education](#) for longitudinal purposes.
- Emerging policy issues based on common themes derived from the daily SHEEO policy update, which include news and updates related to state and national higher education policy, prior survey write-in issues, recently shared concerns among SHEEOs, and upcoming legislative initiatives.
- Retiring policy issues that have been ranked lower in importance and held constant in survey results or specific to a historical event or period that is no longer relevant (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic concerns).

In 2024, the survey added the following policy issues: FAFSA completion; college closures/financial stability of institutions; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) curriculum and programming; and academic tenure. The survey retired several issues, including: COVID-19 pandemic effects on institutions and students, instructional delivery models, and immigration/undocumented students. Forty-one state higher education executive officers (SHEEOs) of the 62 members of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association responded to the survey.

Using the list of issues, we asked SHEEOs to look toward 2024 and identify the importance of each higher education issue in their state. Respondents chose from the following multiple-choice options for each issue: very important (5); important (4); somewhat important (3); slightly important (2); not important (1); not applicable (0). Respondents were also asked to provide context or additional information and details on each issue and were given the option to add issues to the list.

SHEEO identified the top 10 state priorities for higher education by ranking issues according to their average score (not including zeros). The 10 issues with the highest average score are outlined below. In addition, we included two honorable mention issues, ranked 11 and 12. A table showing the percentage of respondents who selected each importance category or no rank appears in the *Appendix*.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

States face numerous important higher education policy issues each year, with some topics consistently among the top priorities for policymakers while others represent emerging public policy concerns. College affordability, for example, remains a long-term concern, while other topics, such as enrollment decline, are driven by the current higher education context. *Table 1* lists the major state higher education policy issues facing states in 2024, ranked by the average score SHEEOs provided on the importance of each issue.

TABLE 1

STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ISSUES IN 2024 RANKING AND AVERAGE SCORE (SCALE = 1-5)

STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ISSUE	RANK	AVERAGE SCORE
ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT	1	4.68
STATE OPERATING SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	2	4.66
HIGHER EDUCATION'S VALUE PROPOSITION	3	4.51
COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY	4	4.44
STATE FUNDING FOR FINANCIAL AID PROGRAMS	5	4.41
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION	6	4.27
COLLEGE COMPLETION/STUDENT SUCCESS	7	4.23
ENROLLMENT DECLINES	8	4.22
K-12 TEACHER WORKFORCE	9	4.10
ADULT/NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS	10	4.05
FAFSA COMPLETION*	11	4.00
INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY/EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION	11	4.00
STUDENT HEALTH AND SAFETY	13	3.90
STUDENT BASIC NEEDS (FOOD, HOUSING, CHILDCARE, ETC.)	14	3.77
RETAINING COLLEGE GRADUATES ("BRAIN DRAIN")	15	3.68
ADDRESSING EQUITY GAPS	16	3.66
EFFECTS OF INFLATION ON COSTS OF GOODS AND SERVICES	17	3.48
QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION	18	3.43
STATE DATA SYSTEMS	19	3.32
ADEQUACY OF PHYSICAL FACILITIES	20	3.31
COLLEGE CLOSURES/FINANCIAL STABILITY OF INSTITUTIONS*	21	3.12
FACULTY SUPPLY/SALARIES/QUALITY	22	3.08
DEI CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMMING*	23	3.05
ACADEMIC FREEDOM	24	2.77
ACADEMIC TENURE*	25	2.26

NOTES:

1. SHEEOs chose from the following multiple-choice options for each issue: very important (5); important (4); somewhat important (3); slightly important (2); not important (1); not applicable or unranked (0). Zero was not factored into average score (mean).

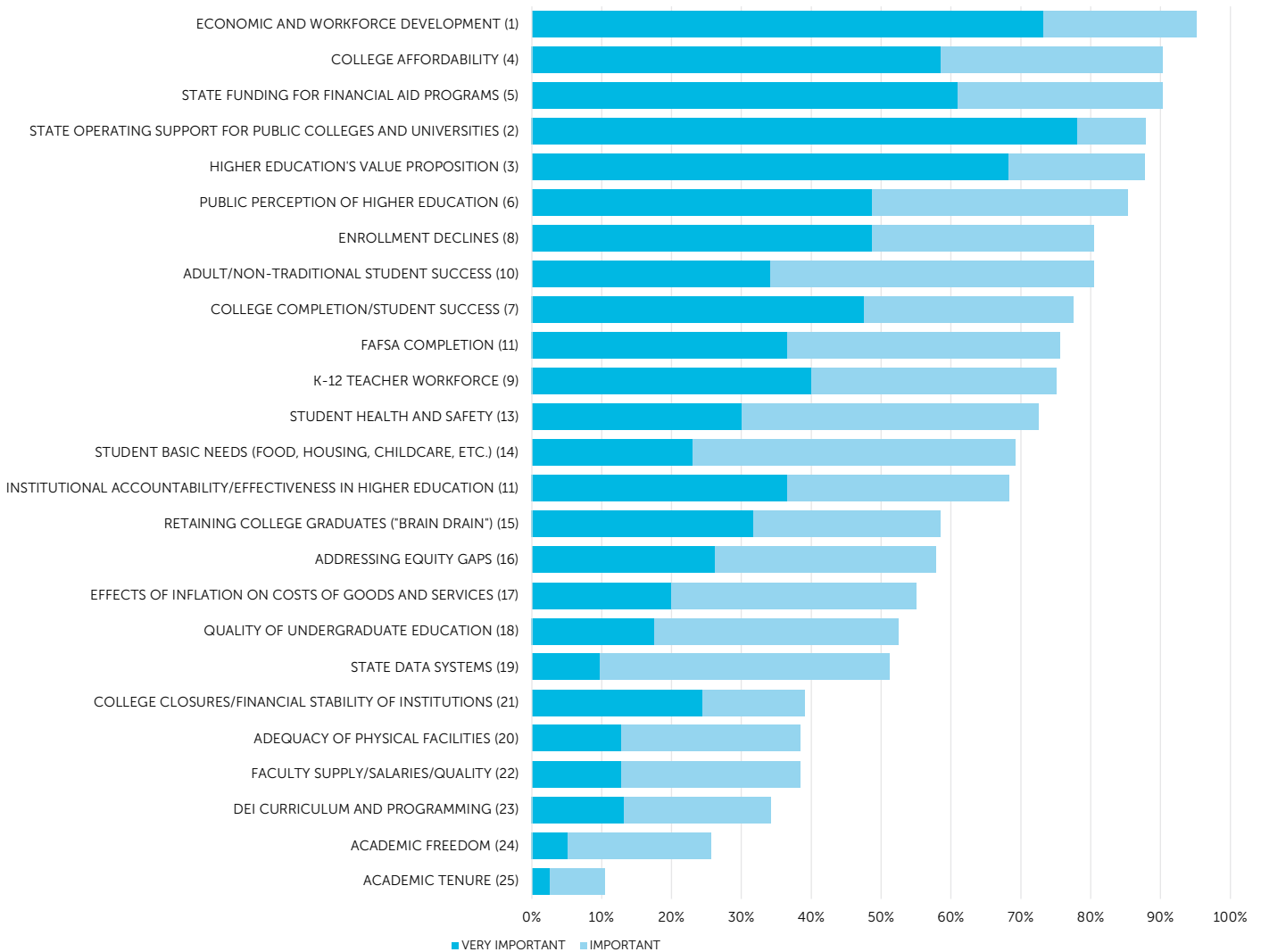
2. Asterisks (*) designate policy issues newly added to survey in 2024.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

Like in 2023, economic and workforce development continues to be the top priority for state higher education leaders for 2024. Over the past year, the top five issues have remained relatively similar except for K-12 teacher workforce falling to the ninth most important issue while previously ranking second. Adult/nontraditional student success entered the top 10 due to the slight decline of addressing equity gaps. FAFSA completion was newly added this year due to its timeliness, given the federal government's FAFSA simplification initiative. This policy tied with institutional accountability/effectiveness in higher education, both ranking 11th. All other new issues ranked relatively low.

Figure 1 lists each issue based on the percentage of respondents who indicated the issue was either important or very important. While this list resembles the average score ranking, there are some notable differences. For example, college affordability and state funding for higher education programs were two issues that almost all respondents classified as important or very important, but which received a lower ranking and were not as high on the list of top issues based on their average score. This is due to respondents who ranked these issues as “not important,” which brought down the average importance score. The following sections provide additional description and context of each of the top policy priorities identified through this survey.

FIGURE 1
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS INDICATING A 2024 ISSUE IS IMPORTANT OR VERY IMPORTANT



NOTE:

1. Ranks based on average score shown in parentheses. SHEEOs chose from the following multiple-choice options for each issue: very important (5); important (4); somewhat important (3); slightly important (2); not important (1); not applicable or unranked (0). Zero was not factored into average score (mean).

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

TOP 10 STATE PRIORITIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

ISSUE 1: ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Economic and workforce development remains atop the policy priority list for SHEEOs for the second straight year. Workforce shortages remain a leading concern for state policymakers, with the shortages stemming from a host of factors, including an uptick in baby boomer retirements, lower birthrates, and a pandemic-era slowdown in immigration.³ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are currently over 8.7 million open jobs across the United States.⁴ The shortages remain uneven across industry sectors, with some having eliminated their shortages while others continue.⁵

Governors and legislators throughout the country are looking to the state's higher education system to train and educate the future workforce, including in key areas with high demand, such as health care. SHEEOs have worked closely with their state business communities to develop educational opportunities linked to in-demand jobs in their states. In Missouri, for example, the state's Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development has already met its 2025 goal of 20,000 new registered apprenticeships and has called for 55,000 new apprenticeships.⁶ In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) has partnered with Google to allow PASSHE undergraduates to earn a Google career certificate while earning an undergraduate degree.⁷ More states are opting to pursue free community college programs, including those designed for adult students, as a way to address state workforce needs.⁸

ISSUE 2: STATE OPERATING SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

SHEEOs identified state operating support for public colleges and universities as a top policy priority for states in 2024. As seen in *Figure 1*, nearly 90% of respondents ranked state support for public colleges and universities as important or very important, with 78.0% of those respondents having selected the latter.

State operating support is generally the primary revenue source for higher education. In fiscal year 2023, state operating support to public institutions totaled more than \$77 billion, accounting for 72.0% of total state funding for higher education.⁹ While state operating support for public colleges and universities has increased in most states over the past two decades, state operating support decreased in more than half of all states from fiscal years 2020-2022, when adjusted for inflation.¹⁰

3. Weber, L. and Pipe, A. (2023, September 25). Why America has a long-term labor crisis, in six charts. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/economy/jobs/labor-supply-economy-jobs-charts-3285a5b7>

4. Gurley, L. K. (2023, December 8). U.S. adds jobs in November as labor market remains slow but steady. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/12/08/jobs-november-unemployment/>

5. Davidson, P. (2023, November 7). Job openings tumble in some industries, easing worker shortages. Others still struggle. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2023/11/06/worker-shortages-ease-some-industries/71444033007/>

6. Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development. (2023, November 15). *Missouri celebrates National Apprentice Week, commend continued growth and opportunities*. <https://dhewd.mo.gov/newsapp/newsitem/uuid/5796f095-1054-4f43-b94d-b925d6716a13>

7. Office of Governor Josh Shapiro (2023, August 29). *Governor Shapiro announces new partnership with Google, PASSHE to train and expand Commonwealth's workforce for high-growth jobs*. <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/governor-shapiro-announces-new-partnership-with-google-passhe-to-train-and-expand-commonwealths-workforce-for-high-growth-jobs/>

8. National Governors Association. (2023, March 27). *Governors prioritize postsecondary education pathways in 2023 State of the State Addresses*. <https://www.nga.org/news/commentary/governors-prioritize-postsecondary-education-pathways-in-2023-state-of-the-state-addresses/>

9. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2023). *Grapevine use table 2, State fiscal support for public institution operations, Fiscal years 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023*. https://shef.sheeo.org/grapevine/?report_page=data-tables#stimulus-tables. Not adjusted for inflation.

10. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2023). *State higher education finance: FY 2022*. https://shef.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SHEEO_SHEF_FY22_Report.pdf

Operating support from states is increasingly important to counterbalance inflationary pressures in operating costs and avoid potential tuition increases. In states focusing on tuition freezes and college affordability, state operating support to institutions is critical, as these funds subsidize the costs of educating students. Respondents stated that state operating support has not only been a topic of importance in the most recent legislative session, but that in general, state operating support is always an area of great importance due to its role in funding higher education.

In fiscal year 2023, state funds to higher education increased an estimated 9.1%, accounting for 9.2% of state general fund spending.¹¹ Although general funding may slow in 2024 due to the waning of one-time expenditures during the COVID-19 pandemic, state economic conditions are expected to stay strong in general, and higher education may benefit from these economic conditions in some states.¹² However, institutions across sectors are expected to experience financial challenges in the coming year due to uneven enrollment recovery, limited tuition increases, and higher operating costs in fiscal 2024.¹³

ISSUE 3: HIGHER EDUCATION'S VALUE PROPOSITION

The value proposition continues to be a leading concern for state higher education officials. More students, parents, and policymakers are concerned that investments in higher education are not yielding a good financial return in the workforce. According to a March 2023 poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, 42% of Americans agree that a four-year degree is “worth the cost because people have a better chance to get a good job and earn more income over their lifetime” against 56% who believe that it is not worth the cost. A decade ago, those numbers were nearly flipped—53% viewed a four-year degree as worth the cost, 40% did not.¹⁴

Beyond policy efforts to make college affordable and to improve its value, states have also pursued efforts to inform residents of the value of a college degree. In Iowa, for example, the Board of Regents has created a new income and debt dashboard on public university graduates in response to a new state law.¹⁵ In December 2023, the Colorado Department of Higher Education released its annual return on investment report, which details the value of college credentials in the state. The University of North Carolina System, likewise, has also released a report on the return on investment (ROI) of its undergraduate and graduate programs across its system institutions from 2015-2020.¹⁶ Additionally, Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education has sought to expand public understanding of higher education's value through a statewide advocacy initiative, discussions with the business community and other key stakeholders, and engagement with media outlets.¹⁷

11. National Association of State Budget Officers. (2023). *2023 State expenditure report*. <https://www.nasbo.org/reports-data/state-expenditure-report>

12. National Association of State Budget Officers. (2023). *Proposed and enacted budgets*. <https://www.nasbo.org/resources/proposed-enacted-budgets>

13. Fitch Ratings. (2023, December 4). *U.S. higher education outlook 2024*. <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/us-public-finance/us-higher-education-outlook-2024-04-12-2023>

14. Belkin, D. (2023, March 31). Americans are losing faith in college education, WSJ-NORC poll finds. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-are-losing-faith-in-college-education-wsj-norc-poll-finds-3a836ce1>

15. Miller, V. (2023, October 13). Regents rolling out graduate income and debt dashboard, per new law. *The Gazette*. <https://www.thegazette.com/higher-education/regents-rolling-out-graduate-income-and-debt-dashboard-per-new-law/>

16. University of North Carolina System (2023, November). *University of North Carolina System evaluation of academic programs*. <https://www.northcarolina.edu/wp-content/uploads/reports-and-documents/economic-reports/unc-roi-study-of-university-programs-november-2023.pdf>

17. Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. (2023). *2023 progress report*. <https://cpe.ky.gov/data/reports/2023progressreport.pdf>

ISSUE 4: COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

College affordability is a primary topic of interest among SHEEOs, with more than 90% indicating that affordability is an important or very important issue in their state. Given that affordability is linked with several other state priorities that landed in the top 10 (e.g., state operating support, funding for financial aid programs, enrollment declines, college completion and student success, and FAFSA completion), strategies to address affordability concerns also can address other state-level priorities. The results of a recent SHEEO survey found that nearly two-thirds of states regularly report on and measure affordability.¹⁸ While states utilize a variety of measures to determine how affordable postsecondary educational opportunities are, many states seek to better coordinate the primary finance policies of ensuring adequate operating appropriations, student financial aid programs, and policies for setting tuition.

Tennessee provides an example of strong coordination among these policy levers. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission has adopted a strategic finance plan that established the goal of being the most affordable state for higher education in the South.¹⁹ The plan defined affordability as a measure of net price (sticker price tuition minus financial aid) relative to average family income and identified appropriations, financial aid, and tuition policy solutions to help achieve the state affordability goal. The plan grouped policies into three categories: foundations, advancements, and innovations. Foundations were existing policies that were important to maintain, advancements were extensions or modifications of current policies, and innovations were new policy priorities that had yet to be implemented.

While affordability is often seen primarily through a finance lens, some states are beginning to view it through an academic affairs lens. States adopting an academic affairs lens are pursuing policies that lead to more efficient credit accumulations among students. States are expanding access to dual enrollment courses, improving transfer and articulation agreements, and providing clearer opportunities to receive credit for prior learning.

ISSUE 5: STATE FUNDING FOR FINANCIAL AID PROGRAMS

State funding to support financial aid programs is a common focus among policymakers, as it is one way to address college affordability in their state. The proportion of state funding to higher education that is directed to state financial aid for students attending public institutions has steadily increased in recent years. In fiscal year 2023, states allocated a total of \$14.8 billion to state financial aid, accounting for 13.2% of all state support to higher education.²⁰ Most respondents identified state funding for financial aid programs as a policy priority for fiscal 2024. Ninety percent ranked this topic as important or very important, with 60.0% having selected very important.

Investment in state financial aid programs varies. State financial aid programs, including portable financial aid packages that students can take with them to the institution they choose to attend, are a primary way in which some states address college affordability. States with fewer or lower-funded, need-based, state financial aid programs and those seeking to expand need-based programs tended to rank state funding to financial aid as very important.

18. Prescott, B., Laderman, S., & Allison, T. (2022). *Results from a national survey on approaches to funding base operations*. SHEEO Policy Conference. <https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/08-09-Results-from-a-National-Survey-on-Approaches-to-Funding-Base-Operations.pdf>

19. Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2020). *Investing in Tennessee: The postsecondary education strategic financial plan*. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/fiscal_admin/fiscal_pol/strategic-financial-plan/Stratgic%20Financial%20Plan_January%202020.pdf

20. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2023). *Grapevine use table 3, State fiscal support for higher education financial aid and research, Fiscal years 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023*. https://shef.sheeo.org/grapevine/?report_page=data-tables#use-tables

One avenue through which a growing number of states have been funding financial aid is implementing tuition-free programs. In recent years, some states, such as Michigan and Kansas, have funded tuition-free college programs, significantly increasing the amount of state financial aid directed to their two-year sectors.²¹ State funding to financial aid tended to rank very important among respondents in states that have or are considering tuition-free college programs. However, for those with well-established, robust, tuition-free programs, state funding to financial aid ranked as less important. Minnesota is one state that will fund a tuition-free program, primarily as a tool to keep students in-state.²² While these programs offer opportunities for residents, they can put pressure on surrounding states, such as North Dakota, which relies on students from Minnesota to bolster enrollment in their colleges and universities, resulting in education leaders seeking long-term solutions from state legislators.²³

ISSUE 6: PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Public perception of and trust in higher education has declined in recent years. One recent poll indicated that confidence in higher education has dropped by more than 20 percentage points among certain demographic groups since the mid-2010s, especially among older Americans and those who identify as Republicans.²⁴ In some cases, this is due to growing dissatisfaction with colleges and universities based on views that institutions of higher education are going in the wrong direction. Other recent concerns have been partisan, with growing debate over the political agendas of institutions and their faculty and staff.²⁵ With some members of the public perceiving institutions of higher education as leaning too far to the political left, legislators in some states, such as Florida, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin, have proposed or passed legislation limiting diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and adding requirements to increase “intellectual diversity” on college campuses.^{26, 27, 28, 29}

SHEEOs generally framed public perception as important, indicating public perception is a challenge in their state, especially when discussing or engaging in specific topics and areas of study. In states where the public perception of higher education is under greater pressure due to concerns over college costs, free speech issues, diversity in political perspectives, or general distrust in higher education, SHEEOs tended to rank public perception as more important. As we move into the 2024 election cycle, higher education is likely to remain an issue that state and federal candidates discuss.³⁰ However, this may result in the public’s perception of higher education continuing to decline, potentially increasing the number and types of challenges that SHEEOs and state policymakers will face in 2024.

21. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2023). *State higher education finance: FY 2022*. https://shef.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SHEEO_SHEF_FY22_Report.pdf
22. Navratil, L. (2023, November 25). Minnesota started offering free public college tuition. Now North Dakota State University is, too. *Star Tribune*. <https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-north-dakota-free-college-tuition-north-star-promise-fargo-moorhead-concordia-competition/600322288/?refresh=true>
23. Fulton, J. (2023, October 13). North Dakota lawmakers hear potential changes to state education financial aid programs. *The Bismarck Tribune*. https://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-regional/education/north-dakota-lawmakers-hear-potential-changes-to-state-education-financial-aid-programs/article_4949118c-6886-11ee-a215-e3e6fa3496a5.html
24. Blake, J. (2023, July 11). American confidence in higher ed hits historical low. *Insider Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/financial-health/2023/07/11/american-confidence-higher-ed-hits-historical-low>
25. Kelderman, E. (2023, September 5). What the public really thinks about higher education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-the-public-really-thinks-about-higher-education>
26. Saunders, J. (2023, May 5). Bill barring diversity, equity, inclusion spending at state colleges, universities passes. *The Miami Herald*. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article275020896.html>
27. Phillips, J. (2023, November 29). Governor Youngkin speaks at University of Virginia to encourage intellectual diversity. *NBC 29 Charlottesville*. <https://www.nbc29.com/2023/11/29/governor-youngkin-speaks-university-virginia-encourage-intellectual-diversity/>
28. Kremer, R. (2023, March 28). *Republican lawmakers to hold hearings on what they call lack of ‘intellectual diversity’ at UW campuses*. Wisconsin Public Radio. <https://www.wpr.org/node/2085141>
29. Nietzel, M. T. (2023, July 18). Ohio will spend \$24 million to create five university “intellectual diversity” centers. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2023/07/18/ohio-will-spend-24-million-to-create-five-university-intellectual-diversity-centers/?sh=3bd27f2876f6>
30. Moody, J. (2023, March 7). A tale of 3 governors. *Insider Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/08/three-governors-are-driving-gops-higher-ed-agenda>

ISSUE 7: COLLEGE COMPLETION/STUDENT SUCCESS

More than three-quarters of SHEEOs indicated that college completion and student success is a top state priority for 2024. State higher education agencies are focused on improving student success rates and helping more residents land high-wage jobs that grow state economies. Earning a postsecondary credential of value also provides one of the surest pathways to social mobility. Many students, however, accumulate debt and stop out before earning a credential. Recent data show that at least 62% of borrowers who have defaulted on their federal loans did not earn a credential.³¹ For these students, pursuing higher education can result in downward social mobility and leave them worse off than had they never enrolled.³² As one SHEEO noted in an additional context response, increasingly, student success is being defined as not just earning a credential but also landing a good job.

States are utilizing a wide range of strategies to improve student success by combining financial support with additional student services and advising support. The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) model has been shown to double graduation rates and is being replicated in many other states and contexts now. A recent study exploring an ASAP replication in Ohio found that students participating in the program not only completed at higher rates but also had an 11% increase in earnings.³³

States face many challenges when it comes to implementing student success policy innovations at scale. With limited dollars to invest in the higher education sector, states need to ensure their policies are designed to promote success and improve student social mobility. To this end, SHEEO will be launching a new community of practice in 2024 that is designed to help state higher education agencies identify and scale evidence-based student success policies.

ISSUE 8: ENROLLMENT DECLINES

After years of significant enrollment declines following the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollments have stabilized since spring 2022, dropping just 0.5% across all sectors. Despite the slowdown in declines, however, enrollments have plateaued far below pre-pandemic levels. As a result, many institutions have not fully recovered from the loss of students between 2020 and 2022. A 2023 report from the National Student Clearinghouse Resource Center (NSCRC) found that 1.2 million fewer students are currently enrolled than in 2019.³⁴ Between spring 2022 and spring 2023, the largest declines in bachelor's degree programs occurred at public four-year institutions (0.5% decline) and private four-year colleges (0.2% decline), while community college enrollments increased by 0.5%.

Pandemic losses aside, several factors have contributed to the persistent drop in enrollment since the 2010-2011 academic year. Since 2009, U.S. birth cohorts have become successively smaller, leading to fewer students in the K-12 pipeline into higher education.³⁵ In response to these declines, institutions have resorted to programmatic/personnel cuts, institutional closures and consolidations, and myriad new efforts to attract students to campus. Enrollment declines due to lower birth rates are anticipated to

31. Stratford, M. (2023, December 4). New data on federal student loan defaults. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-education/2023/12/04/new-data-on-federal-student-loan-defaults-00129833>

32. Americans are losing faith in the value of college. Whose fault is that? *New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html?searchResultPosition=10>

33. Hill, C., Sommo, C., & Warner, K. (2023, April). *From degrees to dollars: Six-year findings from the ASAP Ohio demonstration*. MDRC. <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/degrees-dollars#:~:text=After%20six%20years%2C%20the%20program,students%20in%20the%20program%20group>

34. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2023, May 24). *Spring 2023 current term enrollment estimates*. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Spring_2023.pdf

35. Bransberger, P. (2023). *How the pandemic compounds education pipeline challenges*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <https://knocking.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2023/02/Knocking-COVID-Pipeline-Challenges.pdf>

become more pronounced in the coming years. The severity of these challenges will vary by region and institution type, with selective, highly-endowed universities better prepared to withstand demographic changes, while open-access, low-endowment universities will bear the brunt of the decline. Rural regions and parts of the Midwest have experienced some of the largest enrollment declines.³⁶

SHEEOs ranked enrollment declines as the eighth most significant issue in higher education, dropping two spots from the prior year. Eighty percent of SHEEOs said that the issue was either important or very important for their state. One respondent noted that some institutions are still trying to rebound from enrollment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also grappling with declining high school graduate class sizes. Another SHEEO noted that, as in prior years, the legislature in their state is very concerned about declining enrollment. One SHEEO summarized the hopes of many states, commenting that they hoped to “turn the tide on enrollment in fall 2024.”

States have made expanding college-going rates a priority. Some states, such as Tennessee and Michigan, have enacted programs that encourage students with some college and no degree to return to postsecondary education after a stop out. The Tennessee Reconnect promise scholarship is targeted to older enrollees and re-enrollees, while Michigan Reconnect is available to not only workers over 25, but also 21- to 25-year-olds who deferred postsecondary enrollment during the pandemic. Other states have opted to expand online course offerings, including an \$8.6 million investment by the state of Colorado in a consortium of online offerings by the state’s seven community colleges. Novel admissions strategies, such as dual enrollment of high schoolers, test-optional admission, direct admissions, and international recruitment, have been implemented to varying degrees across states to gain new enrollments.

ISSUE 9: K-12 TEACHER WORKFORCE

The K-12 teacher workforce remains a concern for the SHEEO community. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated teacher shortages, but there are structural challenges to recruiting and retaining teachers, such as the substantial expense associated with pursuing a career in teaching, difficult working conditions, and low pay.³⁷ In addition, there are shortages of K-12 paraprofessionals and other school staff. Beyond the shortages, a lack of teachers of color is also a challenge, as schools look to have a teacher workforce that reflects increasingly diverse classrooms. Together, these dynamics could have significant consequences for states seeking to reach educational attainment goals and could hinder efforts to close longstanding equity gaps.

K-12 teacher shortages remain widespread, but also concentrated in certain areas. A Learning Policy Institute report from July 2023 estimated that 10% of teaching positions nationally are either unfilled or filled by a teacher who is not fully certified,³⁸ while a 2022 study conservatively estimated there are at least 36,000 open teaching positions along with 163,000 positions held by underqualified teachers.³⁹ According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), shortages are “more concentrated in western states, rural and urban communities, and high-poverty communities.”⁴⁰

36. National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Number of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions annually by geographic region*. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/trend-table/2/2?trending=row&cid=37&cidv=0%7C1%7C2%7C3%7C4%7C5%7C6%7C7%7C8>

37. Government Accountability Office (2022, October 27). *K-12 education: Education should assess its efforts to address teacher shortages*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105180>

38. Franco, M. and Patrick, S.K. (2023, July). *State teacher shortages: Teaching positions left vacant or filled by teachers without full certification*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/State_Vacancy_RESOURCE.pdf

39. Nguyen, T.D., Lam, C.B., and Bruno, P. (2022). *Is there a national teacher shortage? A systematic examination of reports of teacher shortages in the United States*. (EdWorkingPaper: 22-631). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/76eq-hj32>

40. Government Accountability Office (2022, October 27). *K-12 education: Education should assess its efforts to address teacher shortages*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105180>

States and SHEEO agencies have responded with a range of policy solutions. A growing number of states have started registered teacher apprenticeship programs in recent years. According to New America, 28 states and Puerto Rico have started teacher apprenticeship programs, with six more states and the District of Columbia with programs in the pipeline.⁴¹ In Indiana, the state’s Commission on Higher Education announced in December 2023 that it would expand its Next Generation Hoosier Educators Scholarship, which awards up to \$40,000 for prospective educators who remain and teach in the state for at least five years.⁴² Virginia, meanwhile, has partnered with a private business to accelerate the teacher credentialing process.⁴³ More states will likely pursue policies to address the teacher shortage in the year ahead.

ISSUE 10: ADULT/NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS

Adult and nontraditional students can be defined in several ways but are generally classified by their age (over 24 years old), enrollment pattern (delaying enrollment in postsecondary education by one or more years after high school graduation), financial and family status (having dependents, working full time, or financially independent), or high school graduation status (did not receive a standard high school diploma). Although considered nontraditional, these students have made up the majority of undergraduate students since 1986, ranging from 64.6% to 75.2% of undergraduate enrollment.^{44, 45} The proportion of undergraduate students that identify as nontraditional has increased overall since 1986 and has since plateaued at approximately three-quarters of total undergraduate enrollment.

The rise in enrollment of adult and nontraditional students is broadly celebrated, both for expanding postsecondary enrollment generally and for increasing the pool of students with a postsecondary credential—an important goal for many states. However, nontraditional and adult students have different educational needs and require different educational supports than traditional students. Historically, nontraditional students are significantly less likely to earn a degree or credential within five years of enrollment and are more likely to stop out or drop out than their traditional counterparts.⁴⁶ Lower persistence and attainment rates may be due to additional responsibilities (employment, dependent care), financial circumstances, or institutional resources. Adult students and students with dependents are more heavily concentrated in colleges and universities (i.e., open or nonselective two- and four-year institutions) that spend less per student than high-resourced institutions.⁴⁷ Wraparound services, which provide holistic support of a students’ academic, health, socioemotional, familial, financial, and logistical needs, are critical to ensuring adult and nontraditional student success.⁴⁸

41. Garcia, Amaya (2023, October 26). *How teacher apprenticeship is changing teacher preparation*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/how-teacher-apprenticeship-is-changing-teacher-preparation/>

42. Wright, Aubrey (2023, December 7). *Indiana’s teacher shortage expands for more students amid shortage*. Indiana Public Media. <https://indianapublicmedia.org/news/indianas-teacher-scholarships-expands-for-more-students-amid-shortage.php>

43. Povich, Elaine (2023, July 24). *Plagued by teacher shortages, some states turn to fast-track credentialing*. Iowa Capital Dispatch. <https://iowacapitaldispatch.com/2023/07/24/plagued-by-teacher-shortages-some-states-turn-to-fast-track-credentialing/>

44. National Center for Education Statistics. (1996). *Trends in enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and persistence and attainment among 1989-90 beginning postsecondary students*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578.asp>

45. U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Demographic and enrollment characteristics of nontraditional undergraduates: 2011-12*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>

46. National Center for Education Statistics. (1996). *Trends in enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and persistence and attainment among 1989-90 beginning postsecondary students*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578.asp>

47. The Pell Institute. (2022). *Indicators of higher education equity in the United States*. https://coenet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/publications-Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_US_2022_Historical_Trend_Report.pdf

48. The Hunt Institute. (2022). *Attainment for all: Postsecondary pathways*. <https://hunt-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/final-A4A-brief-april-22.pdf>

Eighty percent of SHEEOs agreed that adult/nontraditional student success was important or very important in their state, making it the tenth most salient issue in this year's survey. This ranking represents a significant increase from the prior year, when adult/nontraditional student success was tied as the fifteenth most pressing issue. SHEEOs noted that adult/nontraditional student success is directly linked to declining enrollment, remarking that as high school graduate cohorts shrink, more states will seek out adult and nontraditional students to counteract enrollment drops.

One pathway to support adult/nontraditional student success is the development of promise programs targeted to returning or adult students. SHEEO and the Lumina Foundation worked with 15 states to design and implement promise-type programs for adult students by 2020. These programs consider the unique circumstances of adult learners, including financial constraints, employment obligations, and care for dependents.⁴⁹

49. Carlson, A., & Laderman, S. (2018). *The power of a promise: Implications and importance of adult promise programs*. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. <https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Adult-Promise-White-Paper-The-Power-of-a-Promise.pdf>

HONORABLE MENTIONS

ISSUE 11: FAFSA COMPLETION

In 2023, approximately 53.4% of high school seniors completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a 3.9% increase over 2022 but still below the pre-pandemic completion rate of 54.0% in 2018.⁵⁰ Completion of the FAFSA is a significant predictor of student enrollment in postsecondary education. High school seniors are 84% more likely to enroll in postsecondary education if they complete a FAFSA, while students from the lowest socioeconomic quintile are 127% more likely.⁵¹ FAFSA completion is particularly important for low-income students, as they are only eligible for federal grants and loans if they complete the form. Moreover, many state financial aid programs also require students to complete the FAFSA to determine financial need. As the cost of college continues to rise, access to state and federal financial aid becomes increasingly important.

FAFSA completion will be further complicated in 2024 by the FAFSA Simplification Act and the implementation of the new FAFSA form. The changes mandated by the Simplification Act represent the most significant overhaul of the federal financial aid process since the early Higher Education Acts. The primary purpose of simplification is twofold: to make the process of applying for federal aid simpler and more accessible and to make financial aid eligibility more transparent and predictable for students and their families. Due to these changes, the release of the new FAFSA has been delayed from October 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, compressing the timeframe for students to complete the form.

Because of the importance of the FAFSA for college affordability and the uncertainty of the impacts of FAFSA simplification on completion rates, 76% of SHEEOs understandably agree that FAFSA completion is an important or very important issue. A number of states have statewide FAFSA completion goals with targeted completion rates or annual completion rate increases. One SHEEO noted that changes to the FAFSA may disrupt completion rates. Another indicated there is pressure to implement a FAFSA completion mandate. Thirteen states either currently have or will soon have a universal FAFSA policy, which requires high school seniors to complete the FAFSA in order to graduate high school.⁵² Most states provide exceptions for students who do not wish to or cannot complete the FAFSA, but the ultimate goal is to encourage students to apply for the financial aid needed to afford postsecondary education.

ISSUE 12: INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY/EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

With states and local governments investing more than \$120 billion⁵³ in the higher education sector, SHEEOs placing a priority focus on institutional accountability and effectiveness should not be a surprise. Institutions are expected to be good stewards of the public funding they receive, and SHEEO agencies play an important role in ensuring institutions are responsive to the needs of the state as a whole.

50. DeBaun, B., (2023). *Class of 2023's FAFSA completions grow 3.9%, fall short of pre-pandemic rates*. National College Attainment Network. <https://www.ncan.org/news/645481/Class-of-2023s-FAFSA-Completions-Grow-3.9-Fall-Short-of-Pre-Pandemic-Rates.htm>

51. DeBaun, B., (2019). *Survey data strengthen association between FAFSA completion and enrollment*. National College Attainment Network. <https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456025>

52. National College Attainment Network. (2023). *Universal FAFSA completion with supports*. <https://www.ncan.org/page/UniversalFAFSA>

53. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2023). *State higher education finance: FY 2022*. https://shef.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SHEEO_SHEF_FY22_Report.pdf

States utilize a variety of accountability mechanisms. Twenty-eight states use performance metrics to allocate state funding.⁵⁴ These models are intended to provide institutional incentives to help meet state goals. As enrollment has declined and inflationary pressures have created financial stress for many institutions, a growing number of state agencies are actively monitoring the financial health of public institutions. New Jersey recently passed legislation that requires the SHEEO agency to annually monitor the financial health of public institutions.⁵⁵

Many SHEEO agencies also have oversight over private institutions through the state authorization process. State authorization is one of the three legs of the program integrity triad. With the harm institutional closures cause to students, states are actively monitoring the financial health of institutions. When institutions do close, SHEEO agencies are often responsible for ensuring students have access to their transcripts and that the closing institution has a plan in place to provide students with a pathway for continuing their education with the least amount of disruption. SHEEO's recent research on college closures also suggests that states need to reexamine their student protection policies to better serve students following institutional closures.⁵⁶

54. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2023). *Performance-based funding for higher education*. <https://shef.sheeo.org/performance-based-funding-for-higher-education/>

55. Biryukov, N. (2023, July 24). More oversight for university finances after troubles at two N.J. colleges. *New Jersey Monitor*. <https://newjerseymonitor.com/briefs/more-oversight-for-university-finances-after-troubles-at-two-n-j-colleges/>

56. Burns, R., Weeden, D., Bryer, E., Heckert, K., and Brown, L. (2023, August). *A dream derailed? Investing the causal effects of student protection authorization policies on student outcomes after college closures*. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SHEEO_CollegeClosures_Report3.pdf

CONCLUSION

This summary provided a list of the top state policy issues for 2024 for state higher education executive officers, but there are a range of other issues that higher education leaders will confront in the year ahead. For state policymakers, higher education will only be one of many pressing issues to tackle, alongside housing, health care, drug abuse, K-12 education, taxes, and environmental sustainability—just to name a few. National political dynamics could affect state policy priorities as the presidential election takes shape in the months ahead.

While most state-level developments in higher education over the next year may not receive national visibility, policymakers will continue to develop creative solutions to expand college access and improve completion rates as states seek to achieve ambitious educational attainment goals and meet workforce needs. These solutions will come amid rapidly changing state demographic, economic, and political dynamics. State higher education executives will play a key role in developing and implementing these policies, but partnerships with public, private, and nonprofit entities, continual state investments, and robust public support remain critical to sustaining policy solutions that will benefit students, families, and state residents in 2024 and beyond.

APPENDIX

TABLE 2
STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ISSUES IN 2024 RANKING AND AVERAGE SCORE (SCALE = 1-5)

STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ISSUE	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT	NOT RANKED	AVERAGE SCORE
ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT	73.2%	22.0%	4.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.68
STATE OPERATING SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	78.0%	9.8%	12.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.66
HIGHER EDUCATION'S VALUE PROPOSITION	68.3%	19.5%	7.3%	4.9%	0.0%	0.0%	4.51
COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY	58.5%	31.7%	7.3%	0.0%	2.4%	0.0%	4.44
STATE FUNDING FOR FINANCIAL AID PROGRAMS	61.0%	29.3%	4.9%	0.0%	4.9%	0.0%	4.41
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION	48.8%	36.6%	7.3%	7.3%	0.0%	0.0%	4.27
COLLEGE COMPLETION/STUDENT SUCCESS	46.3%	29.3%	19.5%	2.4%	0.0%	2.4%	4.23
ENROLLMENT DECLINES	48.8%	31.7%	12.2%	7.3%	0.0%	0.0%	4.22
K-12 TEACHER WORKFORCE	39.0%	34.1%	19.5%	4.9%	0.0%	2.4%	4.10
ADULT/NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS	34.1%	46.3%	12.2%	4.9%	2.4%	0.0%	4.05
FAFSA COMPLETION*	36.6%	39.0%	14.6%	7.3%	2.4%	0.0%	4.00
INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY/EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION	36.6%	31.7%	26.8%	4.9%	0.0%	0.0%	4.00
STUDENT HEALTH AND SAFETY	29.3%	41.5%	14.6%	12.2%	0.0%	2.4%	3.90
STUDENT BASIC NEEDS (FOOD, HOUSING, CHILDCARE, ETC.)	22.0%	43.9%	17.1%	9.8%	2.4%	4.9%	3.77
RETAINING COLLEGE GRADUATES ("BRAIN DRAIN")	31.7%	26.8%	26.8%	7.3%	7.3%	0.0%	3.68
ADDRESSING EQUITY GAPS	24.4%	29.3%	29.3%	2.4%	7.3%	7.3%	3.66
EFFECTS OF INFLATION ON COSTS OF GOODS AND SERVICES	19.5%	34.1%	24.4%	12.2%	7.3%	2.4%	3.48
QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION	17.1%	34.1%	22.0%	22.0%	2.4%	2.4%	3.43
STATE DATA SYSTEMS	9.8%	41.5%	29.3%	9.8%	9.8%	0.0%	3.32
ADEQUACY OF PHYSICAL FACILITIES	12.2%	24.4%	39.0%	19.5%	0.0%	4.9%	3.31
COLLEGE CLOSURES/FINANCIAL STABILITY OF INSTITUTIONS*	24.4%	14.6%	29.3%	12.2%	19.5%	0.0%	3.12
FACULTY SUPPLY/SALARIES/QUALITY	12.2%	24.4%	26.8%	22.0%	9.8%	4.9%	3.08
DEI CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMMING*	12.2%	19.5%	31.7%	19.5%	9.8%	7.3%	3.05
ACADEMIC FREEDOM	4.9%	19.5%	34.1%	22.0%	14.6%	4.9%	2.77
ACADEMIC TENURE*	2.4%	7.3%	29.3%	26.8%	26.8%	7.3%	2.26

NOTES:

1. SHEEOs chose from the following multiple-choice options for each issue: very important (5); important (4); somewhat important (3); slightly important (2); not important (1); not applicable or not ranked (0). Zero was not factored into average score (mean).

2. Asterisks (*) designate policy issues newly added to survey in 2024.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association