

Protecting Students Amid Federal Attacks on Higher Education Opportunities

Overview

Following President Donald Trump's return to office in January 2025, the administration quickly began to execute Project 2025's radical political agenda to upend higher education. These changes began with the signing of myriad executive orders that covered topics from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to college oversight. It led to the weaponization of the Office for Civil Rights to investigate colleges and threaten the freezing of federal funding to stop universities from promoting DEI among students, along with the halting of federal research funding for universities and the beginning of the dismantling of the Department of Education. This escalated even further when Republicans in Congress passed the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" (OBBBA). The new law represents a massive upward transfer of wealth, which EdTrust has dubbed [The Great American Heist](#). This law erodes the safety net for millions of people while including large tax cuts for big corporations and the wealthiest Americans and will result in massive increases in barriers to food and medical care for students in school.

OBBBA makes devastating cuts to Medicaid (health insurance) and SNAP (food assistance) and upends education in a way that would make it harder for students from low- and middle-income backgrounds to pursue their dreams through higher education. The law also eliminates Grad PLUS loans, resulting in students being forced to take out private loans with higher interest rates and worse repayment terms to pursue advance degrees, imposes caps on both the amount of money students can borrow per year and the total amount they can borrow for graduate education; fundamentally changes income-driven repayment for student loan borrowers; and delays crucial protections for students defrauded by their schools. Taken together, these changes are likely to limit access, resources, and protections for the college students who need them most.

These federal cuts could be exacerbated at the state level during economic downturns, when higher education budgets are often [reduced](#), as state resources may be redirected to address other pressing priorities. The following sections analyze six urgent threats and outline detailed state and local paths for action. These strategies aim to provide states with a variety of options to consider as they work to mitigate the harm of these changes and to fill the critical gaps left by federal disinvestment.

Summary

Given the impending threats to the future of higher education, there are opportunities for states to make policy and resource decisions that can reduce the potential impact and scope of cuts. Working with policymakers, and higher-ed systems and institutions, state and local advocates can play a role in shaping their state's approach to defending the promise of higher education for Black, Latino, and students from low-income backgrounds.

Additional Resources

[State Legislative Responses to Education Provisions in H.R.1 The One, Big, Beautiful Bill Act](#)