

BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.
MARTIN
CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC
RENEWAL

Indiana

There's a real responsibility to try new things. In a sector that is resistant to change, you don't have to do much to look like Thomas Edison.

—Former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels¹

Universities across the country are facing serious internal and external challenges. Nationally, the demographic cliff threatens colleges with shrinking enrollment and tuition dollars at best, closure at worst. Census projections show a 15-percent contraction in high-school graduates from 2025 to 2039.² Economist Nathan Grawe predicts that losses will be even heavier in the East North Central region, with the college-age population declining by up to 22 percent.³

As shown in the table on page 2, **most of Indiana's public universities have lost enrollment since 2016**. Only Indiana University Bloomington, Purdue Global, and Purdue University's main campus have grown. This trend is expected to continue.

1. Salesforce.org. 2025. "[Restoring Public Confidence in Higher Education: Highlights from the Midwest Innovation Leadership Forum](#)." Sponsored content, The Chronicle of Higher Education, accessed December 9, 2025.

2. McNaughton, Drumm, Bill Conley, and Bob Massa. 2025. "[Reframing the Enrollment Cliff: A New Lens on Enrollment Management](#)." Changing Higher Ed, August 19, 2025.

3. Copley, Paul, and Edward Douthett. 2020. "[The Enrollment Cliff, Mega-Universities, COVID-19, and the Changing Landscape of U.S. Colleges](#)." The CPA Journal 90 (9): 22-27.

Table 1: Total Enrollment at Indiana's Public Universities⁴

	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Change
Ball State University	18,497	18,712	18,173	18,319	17,817	16,529	16,035	16,510	-10.7%
Indiana State University	11,634	11,664	11,055	10,218	9,282	8,019	7,357	7,108	-38.9%
Indiana University Bloomington	42,785	40,439	40,239	40,031	39,623	42,019	43,803	44,454	3.9%
Indiana University East	2,930	2,533	2,682	2,746	2,524	2,247	2,177	2,153	-26.5%
Indiana University Indianapolis	25,036	25,184	25,135	25,271	24,990	23,569	22,280	21,913	-12.5%
Indiana University Kokomo	2,918	2,565	2,631	2,679	2,766	2,555	2,388	2,347	-19.6%
Indiana University Northwest	3,961	3,253	3,160	3,125	3,052	2,761	2,518	2,421	-38.9%
Indiana University South Bend	5,233	4,466	4,304	4,174	4,050	3,573	3,536	3,670	-29.9%
Indiana University Southeast	4,346	4,033	4,013	3,844	3,655	3,112	2,849	2,905	-33.2%
Purdue University Fort Wayne	8,715	7,781	7,559	7,410	6,427	6,301	6,531	6,539	-25.0%
Purdue Global	261	284	744	21,192	24,567	23,622	24,632	25,103	9,518.0%
Purdue University Northwest	N/A	8,702	7,876	7,526	7,015	6,459	6,554	6,493	-25.4%
Purdue University -Main Campus	37,995	38,960	40,673	41,568	42,279	45,566	46,398	47,618	25.3%
University of Southern Indiana	8,422	8,482	8,396	8,098	7,742	7,226	6,767	6,771	-19.6%
Vincennes University	10,984	10,834	10,019	9,724	9,103	9,059	9,169	9,932	-9.6%

4. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2025. IPEDS Data Center: Custom Data File—Fall Enrollment, Indiana Public Universities (2016–2023). Accessed December 9, 2025.

Internally, creeping illiberalism threatens freedom of speech and conscience for students and faculty. General-education courses are often shallow or overtly ideological. Public trust in universities is at an all-time low. Americans suspect that universities can't deliver real student learning or a reliable return on investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy reform in five areas can prepare Indiana universities to face the challenges ahead. These areas are accreditation, return on investment, general-education curricula, administrative bloat, and viewpoint diversity. Together, legislative changes and better board policies can be used to address these critical issues.

Accreditation

Institutional and programmatic accreditors serve as powerful regulatory gatekeepers for federal funding and occupational licensure, respectively. Our current accreditation system has fostered inefficiencies, stifled innovation, and redirected resources from teaching and learning. Congressional action is needed to address some of the worst excesses of this onerous regulation.

But states also have a role to play. Fortunately, public universities in Indiana are already free to choose between all nationally recognized accreditors for institutional accreditation. However, there is still work to be done.

Indiana legislators and trustees should work together to:

- **Prevent overreach:** Prohibit accrediting agencies from compelling public institutions of higher education to violate state law. Clarify that any principle, requirement, standard, or policy imposed by an accrediting agency that conflicts with state law is unenforceable in the state. This is especially important in regards to programmatic accreditors, some of which have onerous diversity, equity, and inclusion standards that are in conflict with Indiana law.
- **Prohibit discrimination in accreditation:** Facilitate easier transfer on the part of students by ensuring that institutions accept credits from all higher-education institutions accredited by nationally recognized accreditors (not just the formerly regional accreditors). Apply the same principle to recognition of a degree or other certification, faculty qualifications, and undergraduate or graduate admission.

The Martin Center's model [Accreditation Choice Act](#) incorporates these reforms. A version of that model should be considered.

Return on Investment

Incorporate measures of students' return on investment into academic program review processes.

According to an analysis of federal earnings data by the Foundation for Equal Opportunity, nearly a quarter of bachelor's degree programs at Indiana's public universities have a negative return on

investment once the risk of dropping out is included in the calculation⁵:

- Drama/Theatre Arts and Stagecraft, Ball State University: -\$217,394
- Political Science and Government, Indiana State University: -\$90,631
- East Asian Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics, Indiana University Bloomington: -\$409,748
- Psychology, Indiana University East: -\$113,155
- History, Indiana University Kokomo: -\$86,043
- Fine and Studio Arts, Indiana University Northwest: -\$130,958
- Music, Indiana University Indianapolis: -\$192,536
- Fine and Studio Arts, Indiana University South Bend: -\$98,321
- Business/Commerce (General), Purdue University Northwest: -\$165,483
- English Language and Literature (General), Purdue University Fort Wayne: -\$153,367

Indiana legislators and trustees should work together to:

- **Review program-level ROI data:** Undergo academic program reviews that prioritize return on investment for students, as well as enrollment, mission, and cost-effectiveness.
- **Eliminate low-ROI programs:** Eliminate academic degree programs that provide a negative return on investment for students. If individual courses within the program are essential for the university's general-education curriculum, they should be consolidated into another department.

General-Education Curricula

In the age of generative artificial intelligence and the ubiquity of large language models, universities must rehumanize general education, focusing on the knowledge and dispositions that AI cannot replicate. Meaningful general education can be coupled with workforce-aligned majors to ensure that students are ready to thrive in their careers and participate as citizens.

Indiana legislators and trustees should work together to:

- **Adopt a liberal-arts-focused general-education curriculum:** The curriculum should give students a coherent and meaningful education in the history, works, and civic culture of the West, particularly of the United States.

The [General Education Act](#), published by the James G. Martin Center, the National Association of Scholars, and the Ethics and Public Policy Center, recommends the following courses:

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| • Rhetoric & English Composition | • U.S. Government/Civics |
| • Mathematics (e.g., Precalculus, Logic, Statistics, Calculus I) | • U.S. Literature |
| • Laboratory Science (Intro Biology, Chemistry, or Physics) | • Introduction to Economics |
| • Western History I & II | • Founding Ideas of Western Liberty or Art or Economics |
| • U.S. History | • Western Humanities I & II |
| | • World Civilizations |

5. Cooper, Preston. 2025. "[ROI Undergraduate: Return on Investment in Higher Education](#)." Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity (FREOPP). Accessed December 9, 2025.

- **Prohibit DEI requirements:** Courses on “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) or “critical race theory” (CRT) should be eliminated from mandatory general-education requirements.

Administrative Bloat

Over the past three decades, higher-education staffing and spending have increased steadily. After adjusting for inflation, the average administrative cost per student at Indiana public universities grew from \$2,583 in 2016 to \$3,257 in 2023, an increase of 26 percent.⁶ This pace of administrative spending is unsustainable for students, parents, and taxpayers.

At the same time, Indiana’s public-university enrollment has grown just 12 percent, all of which occurred at just three institutions (see above). The other 12 public universities in Indiana all lost student enrollment.

Indiana legislators and trustees should work together to:

- **Restructure administration:** Shrink, consolidate, or centralize administrative functions to enhance efficiency and reduce costs. Eliminate vacant positions. Consider shared services among IU universities, including human resources, financial aid, investment management, procurement, and other relevant areas.
- **Manage costs for students:** Build on Indiana’s tuition freeze by continuing to keep tuition, fees, housing, and other costs low to attract students.
- **Consider institutional mergers:** Merge under-enrolled institutions in a geographic region.
- **Enhance mission alignment:** Eliminate programs or services that do not reflect or further a particular institution’s mission.
- **Limit capital spending:** Pause or cancel unnecessary capital improvement projects. Maximize facilities use.
- **Incentivize faculty retirement:** Offer retirement incentive plans to faculty who are nearing (or past) retirement age.
- **Reform tenure:** Establish a policy that allows for laying off individual tenured faculty members in cases of low academic-program productivity, significant financial emergency, and financial exigency.
- **Right-size athletics:** Downsize intercollegiate athletics activities, especially in departments that are deeply in the red or rely too heavily on student fees. Introduce more intramural sports.

6. American Council of Trustees and Alumni. 2025. [How Colleges Spend Money](#). Accessed December 9, 2025.

Freedom of Expression and Viewpoint Diversity

Freedom of expression and viewpoint diversity are essential preconditions for campus culture and intellectual endeavors to thrive. Changing university policies and practices can contribute to building a culture where freedom of inquiry, academic freedom, and civil discourse flourish.

Indiana's current policies (as shown in Table 2) need to be updated to adequately protect free expression.

Indiana legislators have also taken action to eliminate compelled speech by prohibiting, in Senate Bill 289, public colleges and universities from requiring students or job applicants to submit DEI statements or complete mandatory DEI training.

This is significant progress. However, more remains to be done.

Indiana legislators and trustees should work together to:

- **Host diverse public-policy debates:** Organize events and invite speakers representing a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives to encourage open dialogue and critical thinking among students and faculty. Indiana should consider adopting a version of the model [Campus Intellectual Diversity Act](#), published by the National Association of Scholars.
- **Implement free-speech-orientation programs:** Develop orientation sessions that emphasize the importance of free speech, free expression, and constructive dialogue, reinforcing these values from the outset of students' academic journeys.
- **Adopt statements supporting free expression:** Universities that have not already done so should endorse declarations, such as the Chicago Principles, that affirm a commitment to free speech and the open exchange of ideas.
- **Ensure fair evaluation of academic performance:** Affirm students' rights to impartial assessment of their academic work, safeguarding against bias based on personal beliefs or viewpoints.
- **Encourage constructive dialogue in syllabi:** Encourage faculty to add a section to course syllabi encouraging free expression and constructive dialogue, setting clear expectations for open discourse in the classroom.
- **Incorporate free expression in course evaluations:** Add questions related to classroom free-expression issues in course evaluations to monitor and enhance the campus climate for open dialogue.

Table 2: Speech Protections at Indiana Public Universities⁷

University	Institutional Neutrality*	Chicago Principles	FIRE Rating
Ball State University	Yes	Yes	Yellow
Indiana State University	Yes	No	Red
Indiana University Bloomington	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University Indianapolis	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University Columbus	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University East	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University Fort Wayne (Health Sciences)	Yes	No	N/A
Indiana University Kokomo	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University Northwest	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University South Bend	Yes	No	Yellow
Indiana University Southeast	Yes	No	Yellow
Purdue University (West Lafayette)	Yes	Yes	Green
Purdue University Fort Wayne	Yes	Yes	Green
Purdue University Northwest	Yes	Yes	Green
University of Southern Indiana	Yes	Yes	Yellow
Vincennes University	Yes	No	N/A

* Required by SEA 202, IU policy

7. Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. 2025. [Colleges \(Find a School\)](#). Accessed December 9, 2025. Data compiled by the Martin Center.

CONCLUSION

Indiana's public universities stand at a pivotal moment. Demographic pressures, rising costs, and declining public trust demand bold, decisive action. The recommendations in this Blueprint offer a practical path forward rooted in academic excellence, fiscal responsibility, and the principles of free inquiry. By strengthening accreditation choice, prioritizing student return on investment, restoring a rigorous general-education curriculum, reducing administrative bloat, and safeguarding freedom of expression, Indiana can position its higher-education system for long-term stability and renewed public confidence.

These reforms are specific, implementable steps that legislators, trustees, and institutional leaders can begin adopting immediately. With clear priorities, firm accountability, and a commitment to mission-driven governance, Indiana can build a university system that delivers exceptional value to students, taxpayers, and society.

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of civics education, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/state/indiana>

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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