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# How Florida is Leading the Nation in Higher Education

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# KEY FINDINGS



STUDENTS IN FLORIDA ARE **PAYING LESS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION.**



THE SUNSHINE STATE IS **PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY WITH MYFLORIDAFUTURE.**



FLORIDA HAS ADVANCED **REAL, TARGETED TUITION RELIEF.**



FLORIDA'S LEADERS ARE **PRIORITIZING SMART HIGHER EDUCATION BUDGETING.**

## THE BOTTOM LINE:

**FLORIDA HAS BUILT THE BEST HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE COUNTRY.**

## Overview

Across the country, states are trying to deal with growing higher education expenses. The response by many state policymakers has been simply to throw more money at the problem, resulting in students paying more.<sup>1-2</sup>

Since 2001, states have nearly doubled their spending on higher education, but students are still paying more.<sup>3-4</sup> Simply spending more money on higher education is not the answer to driving down costs. It actually drives them up.<sup>5</sup>

Florida took a different approach, and the state has built the strongest higher education system in the country.



**Simply spending more money on higher education is not the answer to driving down costs. It actually drives them up.**



## Students in Florida are paying less for higher education

While Florida has relatively low higher education appropriations, it has among the best higher education outcomes in the nation.<sup>6-7</sup>

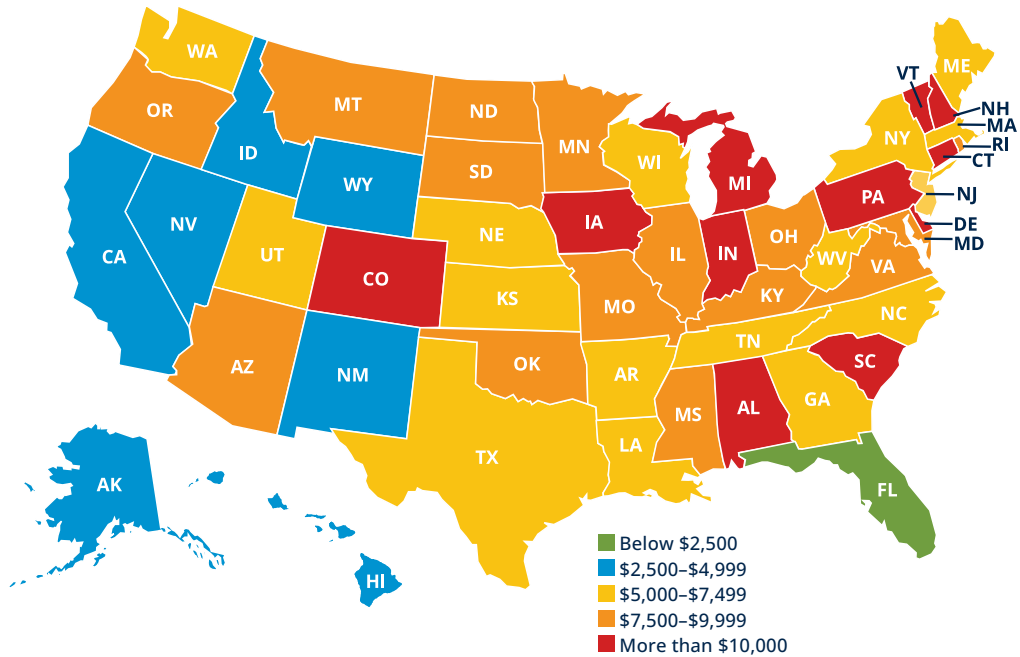
Over the last two decades, enrollment at public colleges and universities in Florida has spiked by nearly 50 percent—almost double the national trend.<sup>8</sup> This is due in large part to the fact that the amount paid by students to higher education institutions per full-time enrollee (FTE) in Florida is by far the lowest in the nation.<sup>9</sup> And since 2001, that amount has declined by 23.1 percent in Florida—making it **the only state in the nation to see a drop in the costs students are paying for higher education** at state-supported schools over the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> Over the same period, this figure skyrocketed by nearly 64 percent nationwide.<sup>11</sup>



**Put simply, as students in all other states are paying more out of pocket for higher education, many students in Florida are actually paying less.**

# FLORIDA STUDENTS PAY THE LEAST TOWARD HIGHER EDUCATION

Public Higher Education Net Tuition Revenue Per FTE by State, FY 2020\*

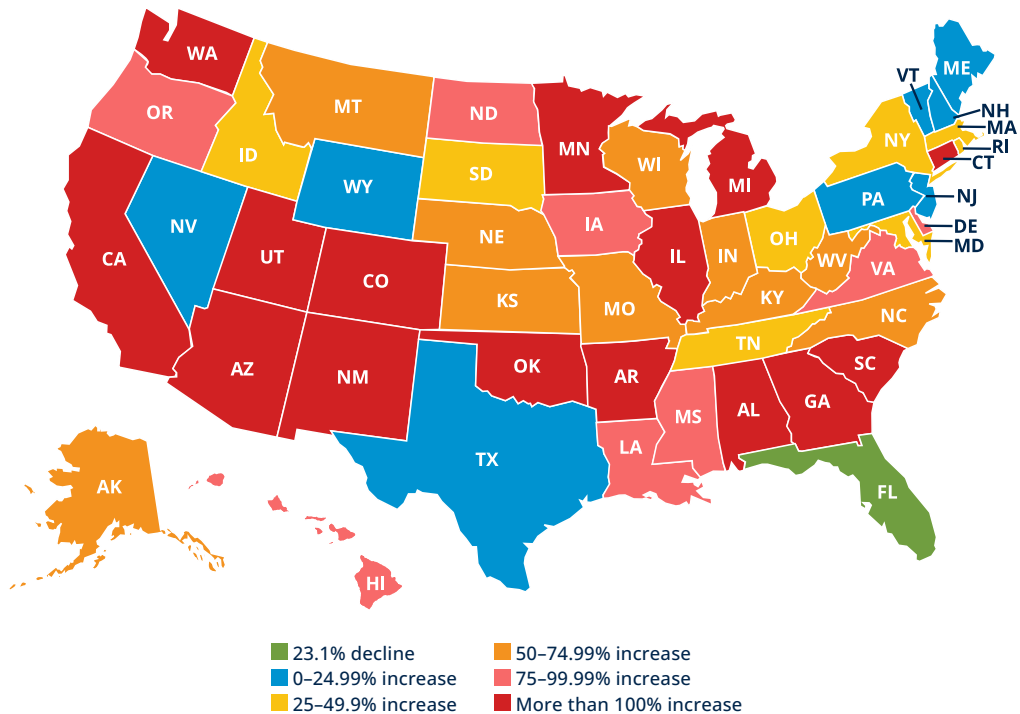


Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

\*Constant-adjusted dollars. Net tuition revenue is calculated by taking gross tuition and fees and subtracting any state aid.

# FLORIDA IS THE ONLY STATE WITH STUDENTS PAYING LESS THAN THEY DID TWO DECADES AGO

Public Higher Education Net Tuition Revenue Per FTE by State, Percent Change from FY2001–FY2020\*



Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

\*Constant-adjusted dollars. Net tuition revenue is calculated by taking gross tuition and fees and subtracting any state aid.

Today, Florida has the **lowest tuition in the nation for public four-year institutions**.<sup>12</sup> Plus, it is ranked among the best in the nation for student loan debt.<sup>13</sup>

Coupled with students paying less, Florida has managed to maintain high marks for its higher education system. U.S. News and World Report has graded Florida's higher education system as the best in the country for five years in a row.<sup>14</sup> Several of Florida's public colleges and universities are in the top 100 public universities in the nation, with some in the top 20, including one in the top five.<sup>15</sup>



**SEVERAL OF FLORIDA'S PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ARE IN THE TOP 100 PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE NATION, WITH SOME IN THE TOP 20, INCLUDING ONE IN THE TOP FIVE.**

Florida's success is the result of wise policymaking. For example, Florida has "long-standing limits on tuition-rate increases at Florida's public colleges and universities, and **undergraduate tuition rates have not increased since 2014**."<sup>16</sup> In 2014, then-Governor Rick Scott and the Florida Legislature implemented measures to eliminate automatic tuition increases while expanding tuition assistance.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of throwing money at institutions, Florida has provided targeted relief to students while holding universities accountable.

But even with all of its past success, Florida's higher education system is about to get even stronger. In 2021, the Florida Legislature passed a series of reforms that Governor Ron DeSantis championed and signed into law.<sup>18</sup> These measures have already begun to increase transparency and reduce higher education costs in the Sunshine State even more.

## **The Sunshine State is promoting transparency with MyFloridaFuture**

In early 2022, the State University System of Florida's Board of Governors launched a free, online dashboard providing students and families with a wide array of information that they need to make decisions about their future.<sup>19</sup>



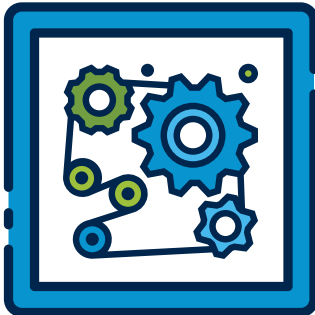
**The MyFloridaFuture interactive dashboard provides a view of:**

- Earnings over time across different fields of study;
- Additional earnings potential across post-bachelor's programs;
- Typical loan amounts, with specifics on how loans could impact students' future household budgets;
- And much more.

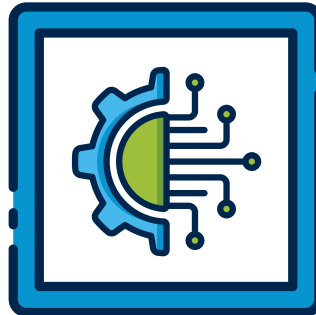
Importantly, the MyFloridaFuture dashboard allows students to customize their results by school, field of study, and program.<sup>20</sup> The variables that students and families can explore show that not all schools, fields, or programs are created equal.<sup>21</sup>

For example, across Florida's entire state university system, a systems engineering major with a bachelor's degree could earn roughly 3.5 times as much as a philosophy and religious studies major five years after graduation.<sup>22</sup> And nearly 60 percent of graduates with an engineering major had no student loan debt after graduation, making the field even more attractive.<sup>23</sup>

**TOP THREE:**



**System's Engineering**  
**\$104,900**

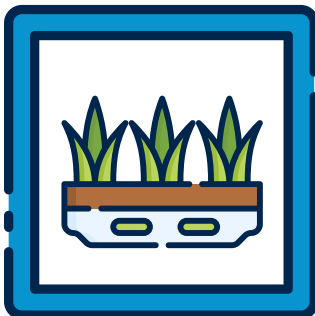


**Computer Engineering**  
**\$97,300**

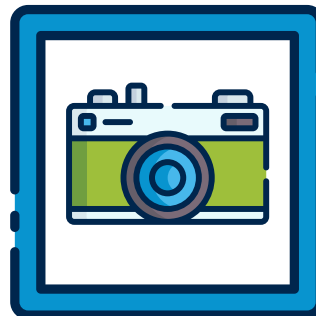


**Cyber/Computer Forensics and Counterterrorism**  
**\$95,000**

**BOTTOM THREE:**



**Water, Wetlands, and Marine Resources Management**  
**\$35,700**



**Photography**  
**\$34,800**



**Philosophy and Religious Studies**  
**\$30,300**

This offers students and families not only the information required to decide which school is best for them, but it actually lays out all post-secondary options with detailed information. Instead of throwing more money at institutions, the state has promoted transparency for Floridians to make decisions that are right for them, their families, and their future.

# Florida has advanced real, targeted tuition relief

Coupled with a transparent system that empowers students and families, Florida has also deployed targeted tuition relief for students attending state-supported schools. In 2021, Gov. DeSantis signed legislation which provided critical tuition relief in four areas.<sup>24</sup> Together, with previous investments in tuition relief, these efforts are yet another reason why higher education in Florida is so affordable.

## “BUY-ONE, GET-ONE” WAIVER FOR HIGH-DEMAND FIELDS

Florida recently took a strong step toward aligning its educational goals with its workforce needs through the creation of the “Buy-One, Get-One” tuition and fee waiver.

Under this reform, for every course in a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) program of strategic emphasis that a student is enrolled in, that student shall be entitled to a free equivalent course in the same program.<sup>25</sup> STEM programs of strategic emphasis are designated by the Board of Governors as meeting critical workforce or economic development needs of the state.<sup>26</sup> In short, students in these programs are entitled to a free course after purchasing their first one—a strong step in the direction of tuition affordability.

## CREATING INCENTIVES FOR YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Beginning with the 2022–2023 academic year, select out-of-state students with a grandparent who lives in Florida will receive a waiver of their out-of-state university fee if they attend a Florida university and have a high SAT or ACT score (for up to 350 students per year).<sup>27</sup> Since the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition is as much as \$22,000 per year, this could be a cost game-changer for students.<sup>28</sup> This will not only encourage students from out of state to consider Florida for higher education, but will attract the best and brightest talent—helping to fill the state’s future workforce needs.

## SUPPORTING OUR SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN

Up to 1,000 veterans and active duty service members each year will now be eligible for a free online course at a Florida state college or university.<sup>29</sup> For all additional courses, these servicemen and women will receive a 25 percent discount on tuition for as long as they remain enrolled (even if it is on a part-time basis).<sup>30</sup> This new incentive will provide those Floridians who sacrifice so much with the opportunity to achieve their higher education dreams at an affordable cost.

## HELPING THE TRULY NEEDY

Florida currently offers robust tuition waiver programs for vulnerable populations, particularly those who have experienced a difficult or challenging home life. Examples of waivers include students who were wrongly incarcerated, children or spouses of emergency service personnel who were killed in the line of duty, and those who were in Department of Children and Families (DCF) custody.<sup>31</sup>

However, there was a lack of clarity in the previous law as it relates to individuals who turned 18 while in DCF custody or under the supervision of a relative caregiver. The legislative fix makes it clear that this group of Floridians is eligible for the full fee waiver at any Florida state university or college.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these four buckets, Florida lawmakers took additional steps to reform the state's higher education system by supporting dual enrollment programs, improving student readiness for the workforce, better assessing college readiness among high school students, and more.<sup>33</sup>

## **Florida's leaders are prioritizing smart higher education budgeting**

Building on the higher education successes of the 2021 legislative session, Gov. DeSantis has proposed his "Freedom First" state budget that continues targeted investments in higher education.

First, the governor will continue to hold the line on tuition and fees at Florida's state colleges and universities.<sup>34</sup> This will mark **the eighth consecutive year in which undergraduate tuition has not increased at Florida's state-supported higher education institutions.**<sup>35</sup> At a time when Floridians and all Americans are suffering from the effects of inflation, the last thing they need is higher costs for higher education.

Second, Gov. DeSantis's budget expands on the state's 2021 higher education support for those who give back to Florida's communities by creating and funding two new programs for law enforcement education and training.<sup>36</sup> This complements the state's recent investments in tuition relief for servicemen and women.

Finally, the Freedom First budget offers performance funding and workforce investments that match the economic needs of Florida's future.<sup>37</sup> This funding directly ties Florida's economy to its higher education programs.

All of these new initiatives are on top of continued robust funding for the state's higher education system as a whole, as well as investments in education infrastructure, support for historically black colleges and universities, appropriations toward distance learning, and more.<sup>38</sup>

## **Bottom Line: Florida has built the best higher education system in the country.**

By combining transparency, targeted tuition relief, and wise investments in higher education, Florida has built the strongest—and one of the most affordable—higher education systems in the nation. In doing so, it has bucked the conventional wisdom that simply throwing more money at institutions is the solution. Rather, that conventional wisdom is precisely what has left so many states behind Florida's lead.

Florida's reforms and investments will help students and families prepare for their future, while also fostering the state's economic future. Other states should emulate the model set forth by Florida and Gov. DeSantis to make higher education more accessible and affordable for generations to come.



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