Arkansas Department of Education

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Sarah Huckabee Sanders
Governor

Jacob Oliva
Secretary

Jacob Oliva
Secretary of Education
Arkansas Department of Education
4 Capitol Mall
Little Rock, AR 72201

September 29, 2026

The Honorable Linda E. McMahon
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary McMahon:

Arkansas' higher education leaders, including the signatories, Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, write in response to your August 3, 2026, letter. While the public's confidence in higher education plummets nationally, Arkansas has led on systematic, conservative reforms to bolster confidence among Arkansas students and industry leaders. We are excited to partner with the Trump Administration and support similar changes nationally.

For many Arkansans, higher education is the ticket to a better life. A single mom in our state found herself with no job and no car, so she biked to school to earn her GED and continued to earn her nursing degree. An Army paratrooper returned home to Arkansas and earned her master's in teaching so she could give back to her community. Our state invests in higher education because of its power to transform lives.

Public institutions of higher education have benefited from outsized federal education spending since the Higher Education Act of 1965. From 2001 to 2024, federal student aid rose from approximately $99 billion to $155 billion, a 57% real increase. The Trump Administration has properly asked, "Are students any better off?"

Arkansas institutions are committed to making good on families' investment in higher education. We provide transparent pricing, proactively reduce students' debt burdens, and track degrees' wage return on investment. Our professors inculcate basic skills in math, science, and English, and our university administrators facilitate environments that enable truth-seeking and not activism.

Governor Sanders' administration has championed bold reform in K-12 and higher education to ensure our schools serve students – not left-wing ideologues. The Arkansas LEARNS Act of 2023 overhauled K-12 education to get woke nonsense out of classrooms and help ensure students graduate high school ready for enlistment, enrollment, or employment. The Arkansas ACCESS Act of 2025 equipped higher education institutions to respond to industry needs; to provide training and not indoctrination; and to offer degrees with real return on investment to students.

Arkansas higher education leaders are now aligned with K-12 education leaders to accelerate students, provide clear and affordable degree pathways, and support your administration's efforts to restore trust in higher education. We are eager to describe our commitments to ensure quality in higher education in the statements below.

1. **Transparency and Merit in Admissions**

How will your institution ensure that admissions criteria are transparent and wholly described to prospective applicants? And how will your institution ensure admissions decisions are based on merit, achievement, and your university's educational purpose?

In Arkansas, transparent admissions come first. Arkansas Code Section 6-61-1703 requires the Higher Education Coordinating Board to distribute a Consumer Guide to prospective students disclosing basic facts before they decide to attend, like retention and graduation rates; cost of tuition; average amount borrowed and loan default rate; admission offer rates at non-open-admission institutions; job placement within three years; alumni income over twenty years; and more.

Arkansas ACCESS prohibits discriminatory admissions practices. Any agent, administrator, employee, teacher, or contractor of a state-supported institution is prohibited from treating students differently on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, color, or national origin. Arkansas Code Section 6-60-1604 also bars institutions from requiring a left-wing "diversity, equity, and inclusion" pledge from prospective students or faculty in admissions, hiring, evaluation, or promotion, which is enforceable by the Attorney General on behalf of the state.

Arkansas has replaced a fragmented admissions process with a single statewide system that aids universities' merit-based admissions processes. In August, the Arkansas Department of Education launched the Arkansas ACCESS Portal. For the first time, students will be able to apply to all state-supported institutions of higher education with one login and no application fees for up to five institutions. The ACCESS portal will enable universities to grant provisional admissions based on merit by viewing students' transcripts, resumes, and test scores. And it makes the on ramp to higher education easier than ever for our prospective enrollees.

2. **Free Speech and Open Inquiry**

How will your institution protect the free exchange of ideas, wide-ranging debate, and openminded campus discourse? And how will you guarantee that unruly and violent protestors do not harass students or disrupt classes, research, public lectures, and campus operations?

Although many teaching colleges in the nation instruct teachers to be political activists, Arkansas has taken a different approach. Teacher candidates receive training in foundational reading and math instruction. Our institutions do not tolerate violence or intimidation from students. Campuses must maintain safe environments hospitable to learning and administrators will not condone violence masked as activism.

Governor Sanders' ACCESS Act stipulates that Arkansas institutions may not grant excused absences for political protests, policy advocacy, or attempts to influence legislation. Public universities may not authorize student walkouts, and compelled speech is not tolerated in classrooms or faculty trainings. Institutions may not require faculty or students to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere to a political, philosophical, religious, or other ideological viewpoint. If a student damages campus property in the course of a protest, they have to pay the school back before they can graduate.

We will never allow a small minority of protestors to infringe upon the majority of students' ability to receive the education they worked for and deserve.

3. **Intellectual Pluralism and Academic Vitality**

How will your institution encourage intellectual pluralism in all its academic units? How will your faculty hiring and evaluation practices support academic vitality and ensure that all relevant perspectives are taken seriously? And how will your institution ensure the research enterprise is dedicated to advancing knowledge, deepening understanding, and serving the American people who fund it?

The ACCESS Act establishes intellectual pluralism as the standard – not the exception – for our campuses. Arkansas Code Section 6-60-1604 states, "It is the policy of this state that a state-supported institution of higher education educates students … on how to think and not what to think." The well-known 1915 *General Report* of the American Association of University Professors wisely recognized that a university will not function properly unless its professors exercise restraint. Professors must diligently support the student's own learning: "The teacher ought also to be especially on his guard against taking unfair advantage of the student's immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher's own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters in question, and before he has sufficient knowledge … to form any definitive opinion of his own."

Faculty hiring practices promote viewpoint diversity. The ACCESS Act prohibits forced DEI statements in hiring, evaluation, and promotion. Arkansas faculty receive regular evaluations based on merit. Annual reviews, including post-tenure reviews, evaluate faculty on teaching, scholarship, and service and draw on assessments by peers, students, and administrators. Reviews may trigger remedial training or removal of tenure status.

Additionally, Arkansas colleges may conduct an immediate for-cause review of any faculty member, including tenured faculty, for professional incompetence, failure to perform duties, unprofessional conduct, or falsified credentials. Arkansas Code Section 6-63-104 requires each institution to report annually the number of tenured faculty reviewed and whether tenure was maintained, conditionally maintained, or revoked.

"There are no rights without corresponding duties," state the authors of the *General Report*. Academic freedom is crucial because professors have important work to do to train the next generation of leaders. Arkansas institutions are committed to fulfilling the original purpose of a college education – to promote inquiry and research, to prepare students for life, and to train experts to serve the community.

4. **Affordability, Value, and Student Outcomes**

How will your institution ensure that families can access affordable, high-return, degrees? And what will your institution do to contain costs, improve pricing transparency, and ensure that every academic program equips students to repay their loans?

We will not allow our students to graduate with a mountain of debt and no clear way to pay it off. The Division of Higher Education employs a productivity-based funding model that measures effectiveness, affordability, and efficiency, directing state dollars where they can do the most good. The ACCESS Act requires the funding formula to incorporate a return-on-investment (ROI) metric for students beginning in the 2026-2027 academic year. Institutions will be rewarded for credentials that align with statewide and regional workforce needs and credentials which provide a wage return for Arkansas students in under eight years.

The ACCESS Act also created the state's first funding mechanism for noncredit programs, enabling the Division of Higher Education to align funding with state economic and workforce needs. Not all higher education pathways include a four-year degree, and Arkansas is recognizing that with our funding priorities.

Arkansas programs provide pricing transparency to students before they commit to an academic or technical program. Colleges and universities must publish employment and earnings outcomes for every degree and certificate and disclose the top twenty-five percent and the bottom ten percent of that institution's own certificates and degrees ranked by job placement and average annual earnings. Under Arkansas Code Section 6-60-105, students in grades seven through twelve and their parents receive an annual briefing with transparent information to inform their plans after graduation.

5. **Academic Standards and Rigor in the Age of AI**

How will your institution incentivize rigor in the age of AI, combat grade inflation, and prioritize excellence in teaching and learning?

Maintaining and ensuring rigor and excellence in teaching and learning requires a systemic realignment of how success is defined and measured for students and faculty, especially as AI enters the classroom and workforce. Act 848 of 2025 required every institution of higher education to create an AI policy, and Arkansas institutions have revised academic integrity and academic honesty policies to address AI in the classroom. Definitions of plagiarism now reach AI-generated content, unauthorized use is an academic integrity offense, and any use offered toward a course requirement must be authorized by the instructor. Because expectations vary by subject, institutions require an AI use statement in the course syllabus and supply faculty with model language.

6. **Safeguarding Research Integrity from Malign Foreign Influence**

How will your institutions protect academic programs from foreign influence, and safeguard the integrity of the research enterprise?

Governor Sanders was the first governor in the country to kick a Chinese state-owned company off American farmland. Our institutions have also taken a hardline stance to prevent foreign influence, and recent legislation bolsters research security in Arkansas universities. Under Act 473 of 2025, universities must disclose gifts from foreign adversaries, submit contract proposals to the governing board, establish a travel monitoring program for employment-related travel to foreign adversary countries, and decline research partnerships with foreign adversaries. Institutions of Higher Education no longer participate in cultural exchange agreements with adversaries. Arkansas is leading boldly by safeguarding industry and research from foreign actors.

7. **Prioritizing American Interests**

How will your institution answer this national call to action? How can your campus and faculty advance American security interests, deliver academic programs that meet urgent workforce needs, and contribute materially to the Nation's prosperity?

The Arkansas ACCESS Act requires every public high school to offer high-wage high-demand pathways to help ensure every high school student graduates ready for enlistment, enrollment, or employment. Our future generation will be the one that defines the next century of American leadership, and Arkansas' universities are answering the call to train talented, curious, and hardworking young people.

Our universities are developing new programs to meet demand for workforce needs. Most recently, the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board has approved AI certificates and technical certificates at multiple University of Arkansas campuses effective Fall 2026. Arkansas institutions are leading defense-related research in engineering, microelectronics, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, advanced power electronics, and aerospace.

Each undersigned institution will publish a statement of principle on its own website addressing your seven questions before December 31, 2026, and the Division of Higher Education will maintain a single index of those statements so the public can find them in one place. Arkansas' private

independent colleges and universities are not parties to this letter, and we are transmitting your letter to them with an invitation to respond.

Thank you for the invitation to share our commitment to educating future leaders in our nation's workforce.

Respectfully,

Jacob Oliva
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Arkansas Department of Education

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