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RESPONSE TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CALL TO ACTION

Actions Requested: Approve the response to the U.S. Department of Education Call to Action.

Executive Summary: On August 3, 2026, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released a National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards. This call seeks to have each higher education institution in the nation publicly affirm its commitment to teaching, research and service. The attached narrative outlines how the universities governed by the Board of Regents continue to transparently and effectively serve students, employers and the citizens of the State of Iowa.

Response to U.S. Department of Education Call to Action

Iowa's state motto, *our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain*, defines not only our people but our public universities. They reflect a tradition of self-governance, transparency and opportunity. Iowa's public universities are setting a national standard for how a state can excel in higher education, grounded in Midwestern sensibility, and committed to the rights and responsibilities that underpin free inquiry.

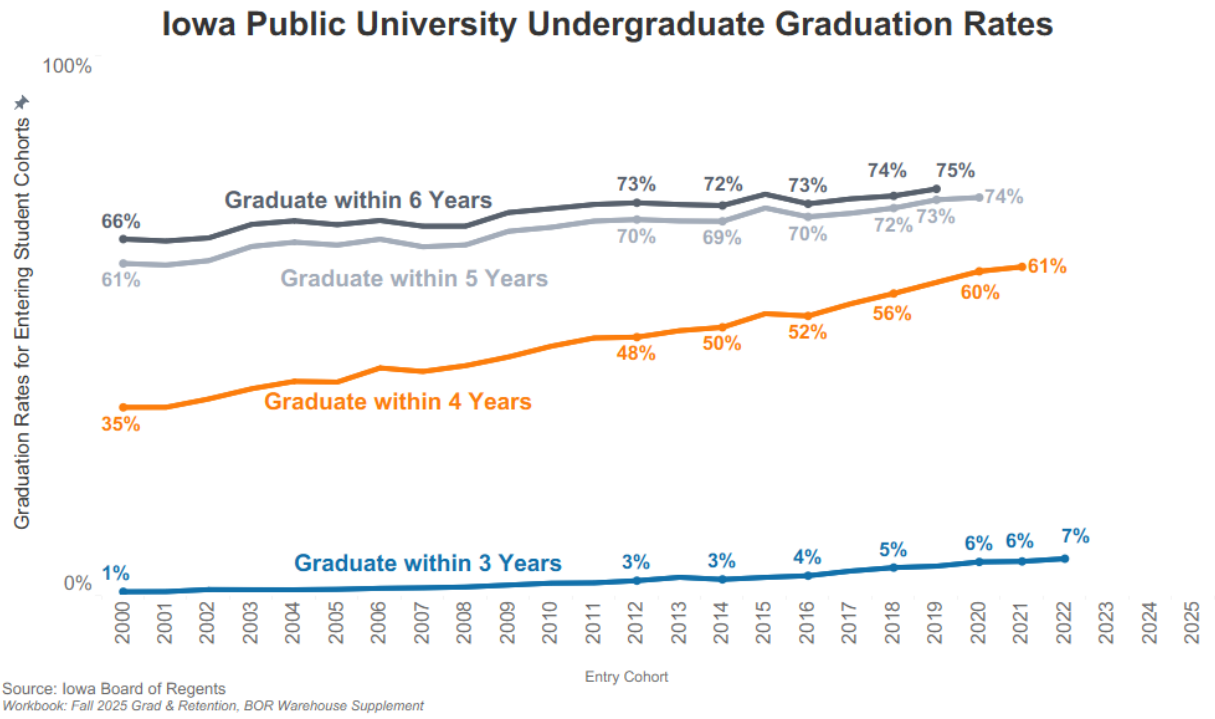
1. Transparency and Merit in Admissions

Our universities uphold admissions processes based on measurable academic performance, they guarantee freedom of expression and debate, and they maintain institutional neutrality rooted in the principle that ideas should compete. Under the leadership of the Iowa Board of Regents, Iowa's public universities will continue to ensure that they reward hard work, scientific and medical breakthroughs, and opportunity for all.

The starting point for all of this is how students gain access to our universities. Admission to Iowa's public universities is grounded in transparency, merit and objectivity. The Board of Regents and its universities use the Regent Admission Index (RAI), an admissions process in place since 2009 that measures documented academic performance: GPA, standardized test scores and completion of core courses.

Board Policy Manual Chapter 3.2 describes the RAI in full detail. A key strength of the RAI is that the established minimum score guarantees Iowa resident freshman admission to any of our public universities. This formula-based guarantee clarifies for students, parents and counselors that admissions decisions are based on merit and achievement rather than subjective measures.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board approved test-optional admissions due to national testing disruptions. Today, approximately 30–33% of admitted undergraduate students apply through the test-optional pathway. Test-optional applicants are reviewed based on high school grades, GPA and core courses, as well as any other evidence they may provide such as AP test scores, college credits earned in high school, or similar documented learning. The Board continues to evaluate this process biennially to ensure students admitted under either method succeed academically. Prior analyses confirm that test-optional admits perform at the same success rates as students admitted with RAI scores above the automatic admission threshold, and in fact, retention rates and graduation rates have been stable and even increased in the past few years.



Source: Iowa Board of Regents
Workbook: Fall 2025 Grad & Retention, BOR Warehouse Supplement

The process for transfer students is also well established and effective. Iowa's Regent universities operate a statewide articulation agreement with the public community colleges in the state to ensure a smooth pathway that avoids loss of credits or the need to unnecessarily repeat coursework. Community college transfer students graduate from Iowa's public universities at rates 5 to 10 percentage points above the national averages for transfer students (extensive data on community college transfer in Iowa is available on our website).

Admissions standards for graduate and professional programs, admissions standards remain rigorous and program-specific. None consider protected class characteristics in admissions decisions, and by 2024 all programs removed such information from materials reviewed in the process. Iowa's commitment to opportunity is clear. To ensure alignment with expectations, the University of Iowa Graduate College developed a Graduate Admissions Toolkit to provide training and guidance directly to admissions committee faculty members and staff about graduate admission rules, policies, guidelines and best practices. Similar training efforts are in place at Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa.

2. Free Speech and Open Inquiry

Iowa's public universities embody the true marketplace of ideas. Each institution provides an environment where ideas are debated openly, where disagreement sharpens understanding, and where free speech is taught and practiced.

The Iowa Board of Regents and the universities have taken several important steps in recent years to reinforce and promote freedom of expression on campus. This effort began with the legislature's enactment of Iowa Code Chapter 261H, which established expectations for protecting free speech rights at Iowa's public institutions of higher education. The Board

affirmed these principles through Board Policy 4.2, Freedom of Expression, which outlines the Board's commitment to fostering an environment where diverse viewpoints may be expressed and debated openly.

In November 2020, an ad hoc Free Speech Committee was established to support implementation of these requirements and principles. The committee reviewed existing practices and developed recommendations aimed at strengthening awareness and understanding of free speech rights and responsibilities across the Regent universities. In February 2021, the committee recommended several key initiatives, including the administration of a biannual free speech survey to assess campus climate and perceptions, as well as annual free speech training to educate students, faculty and staff on freedom of expression policies and expectations.

In April 2021, the Board established the Free Speech Committee as a standing committee to provide ongoing oversight and guidance regarding free expression issues. The permanent committee continues to monitor compliance with state law and Board policy, review survey results and support educational efforts designed to foster constructive dialogue and the free exchange of ideas throughout Iowa's Regent institutions.

To provide information and resources to their campus communities, each of the three Regent universities maintains a dedicated free speech website. These sites serve as central resources for policies, educational materials, reporting mechanisms and information regarding freedom of expression rights and responsibilities at the University of Iowa, Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate a sustained commitment to preserving free expression, promoting civil discourse and supporting a vibrant marketplace of ideas across Iowa's public universities.

Each Regent university also hosts a civic education or free expression center intended to strengthen students' understanding of American government, constitutional principles, civic engagement and the role of free expression in a democratic society.

- **University of Iowa: Center for Intellectual Freedom** This Board-operated center is located at the University of Iowa and serves as a hub for teaching, research and public programming focused on American civics, constitutional government, intellectual diversity, free inquiry and informed citizenship. It promotes the study of the institutions, ideas and traditions that underpin free societies and encourages civil dialogue across differing viewpoints.
- **Iowa State University: Center for Cyclone Civics** Cyclone Civics is a nonpartisan initiative dedicated to advancing civic education and research on free speech. Its activities promote civic literacy, civic skills and civic engagement through curriculum development, research, public events, community outreach and partnerships both on and off campus. The center emphasizes critical thinking, respectful dialogue and participation in public life.
- **University of Northern Iowa: Center for Civic Education** The center works to enhance civic learning among university students, K-12 educators and the broader

public. It supports civic engagement, free speech education and public service through research, professional development, educational resources and programs that expose participants to diverse viewpoints and encourage constructive dialogue.

Collectively, these centers support the Iowa Board of Regents' goal of expanding civic education and education related to free expression, helping students and community members develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for informed participation in civic life within a democratic republic.

Through these measures, Iowa's universities have become national models for free expression and civil discourse; proving that liberty and learning strengthen one another.

3. Intellectual Pluralism and Academic Vitality

The Iowa Board of Regents is committed to fostering a culture of intellectual pluralism, academic freedom and scholarly excellence across Iowa's public universities. These principles recognize that higher education thrives when ideas are examined openly, evidence is evaluated rigorously, and individuals are free to pursue truth without pressure to conform to institutional, political or ideological viewpoints.

Intellectual pluralism is not measured by partisan balance or political affiliation. Rather, it reflects a commitment to open inquiry, the consideration of competing perspectives, and the freedom of faculty and students to reach their own conclusions through reasoned analysis and evidence-based scholarship. The Board believes that universities serve students and society best when they cultivate environments where ideas can be questioned, debated, tested and refined.

This commitment is reflected in Board Policy 3.10 on Academic Freedom, which affirms the freedom of faculty to teach, research, publish and engage in scholarly inquiry germane to their disciplines. The policy also recognizes the corresponding responsibility to promote critical thinking, academic integrity, evidence-based reasoning, and respectful engagement with differing viewpoints. Faculty are encouraged to present controversial topics when relevant to their subject matter while fostering open discussion rather than indoctrination. Likewise, Board Policy 3.20 establishes that students must be free to ask questions, challenge assumptions and explore diverse perspectives, and their academic work should be evaluated on its merit rather than on political or personal beliefs.

The Board's commitment to intellectual openness extends to employment practices. Faculty and staff hiring, retention, promotion and evaluation are governed by public university policies and applicable state and federal civil rights laws. Employment decisions are based on qualifications, professional competence, performance, institutional needs and the educational mission of each university. Iowa's public universities maintain compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and other relevant legal requirements, ensuring employment decisions are grounded in merit, fairness and equal opportunity.

In November 2023, the Board adopted directives designed to further strengthen intellectual openness and viewpoint diversity. These directives prohibit requiring diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) statements from employees, students or applicants; reaffirm the distinction between personal political advocacy and university employment responsibilities; and direct institutions to develop recruitment strategies that broaden the range of intellectual and philosophical perspectives represented within applicant pools. These measures reflect the Board's ongoing commitment to merit-based decision-making and a campus climate that welcomes the free exchange of ideas.

The same principles guide the research enterprise at Iowa's public universities. Across fields including agriculture, engineering, medicine, public health, biosciences, energy, computing, education and the humanities, research is evaluated according to scholarly standards, peer review, ethical and regulatory compliance, innovation and service to the public. The value of academic work is determined by the quality of evidence, the rigor of analysis and the contribution to knowledge, not by ideological conformity.

The Iowa Board of Regents will continue to support academic freedom, intellectual pluralism, merit-based hiring and evaluation, rigorous academic review and a research environment in which evidence, professional standards and the pursuit of knowledge remain the guiding principles of teaching, scholarship and public service.

4. Affordability, Value, Student Outcomes

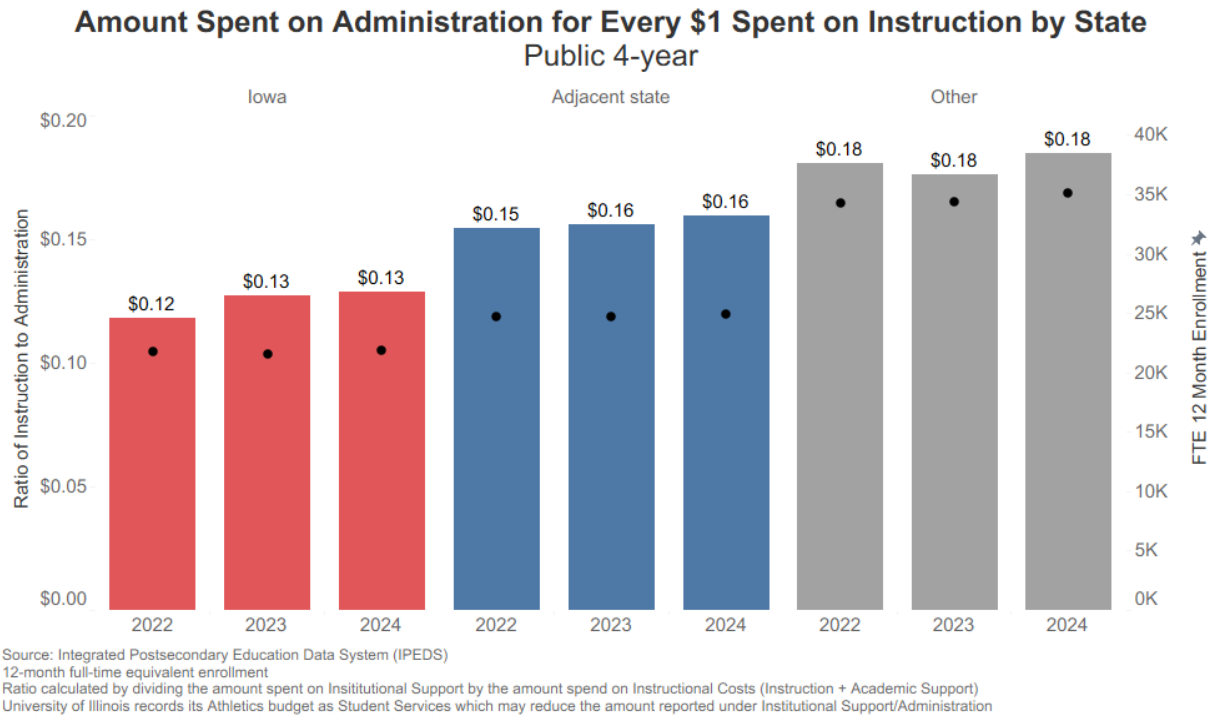
Just as importantly, graduate outcomes from all programs at all levels are publicly posted by program in compliance with Iowa Code 262.9.39**,** giving students and families full transparency about career earnings and debt. This program-level outcome information is also sent to new students annually to ensure they have direct access to information and resources that help them make decisions early in their courses of study and help guide them into the industries and jobs that ensure a strong economy for Iowa and the nation. Data on graduate outcomes can be accessed at:

https://www.iowaregents.edu/reports/recent-alumni-career-outcomes-income--student-debt-by-program

To further evaluate the effectiveness of the universities' academic program, at the February 27, 2025 Board of Regents meeting, Board President Sherry Bates charged the institutions and Board office with conducting a Workforce Alignment Review of all academic programs, tasked with identifying low-enrolled programs, and bringing forth any associated recommendations. Results of the review, published in November 2025, included a new return-on-investment (ROI) metric applied to each academic program that is now embedded on the above dashboard and sent to each new student annually to support informed decisions early in their academic pathways. For graduate and professional programs, the ROI metric is aligned with the federal standard found in PL 119-21 (OBBB Act) and provides the universities with early indications that

nearly all graduates are using their education and training as investments to stronger economic futures.

All of this work requires significant resources that Iowa's taxpayers and tuition-paying families entrust to the universities. In return, the Board of Regents and Iowa's universities steward those resources efficiently and transparently, consistently ranking among the most cost-effective in the nation. Administrative costs at Regent universities are lower than those in nearly every other state, including our Midwestern neighbors.



While Iowa's public universities have some of the lowest administrative costs in the nation, there is always work that can be done to become more efficient and cost effective. The Board will continue to work with the universities to become as efficient as possible. One meaningful example of this continuous effort is the board-directed Revenue Enhancement and Productivity Study (REAPS), launched in December 2025. REAPS is an Iowa Board of Regents initiative focused on identifying opportunities to generate sustainable new revenue, improve administrative efficiency and productivity, and make the best use of resources across Iowa's public universities. The initiative is designed to result in an actionable, sustainable roadmap rather than simply a list of ideas, with a final report of recommendations for board consideration expected in February 2027.

For students and families, the Board sets a tuition policy (Chapter 1.6.F.vii) that limits increases in the base undergraduate resident tuition rate to no more than the average of the three most

recent years of the Higher Education Price Index (HEPI)**.** This ensures tuition growth aligns with inflation rather than administrative expansion, and that the general principle of affordability is embedded for the long haul. Responsible fiscal stewardship is not new in Iowa: in combination with high-quality academics, it is the other half of our value proposition to Iowans.

5. Academic Standards and Rigor in the Age of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming nearly every aspect of modern society, reshaping industries, changing the nature of work and influencing how people communicate, create and learn. Iowa's public universities recognize both the opportunities and challenges presented by these rapidly evolving technologies and are committed to ensuring students are prepared to succeed in an AI-enabled world.

Board Policy 3.20 requires that grades accurately reflect a student's mastery of course content. This fundamental principle does not change in an AI environment. Regardless of the tools available to students, academic assessments must continue to measure actual student learning, achievement and competency.

To uphold these standards, each of Iowa's public universities has established policies, procedures, and instructional practices designed to preserve academic rigor, safeguard the integrity of the learning process, and ensure that grades accurately reflect student performance. These measures and relevant academic policies and standards provide clear expectations regarding the permissible use of AI, help deter academic misconduct, and support fair and consistent evaluation of assignments, examinations, projects and other forms of assessment.

For example, the University of Iowa's Code of Student Life (Sec. E.1) prohibits the unauthorized use of AI tools in academic work. Instructors are asked to clearly communicate when AI tools may or may not be used in their courses, and the Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology provides example syllabus language to support this. The UI Center for Teaching's guide, Navigating Generative AI in Teaching and Learning, helps instructors align AI decisions with their learning goals and disciplinary context. To protect the integrity of online quizzes or exams, all UI courses have access to Respondus LockDown Browser, and Information Technology Services blocks known AI browser plugins on university-managed machines in instructional technology centers and testing centers. In addition, the UI Center for Teaching provides faculty with consultation on ways in which they can design assignments to mitigate students' use of AI.

Similarly, Iowa State University's required undergraduate syllabus template includes a dedicated Generative Artificial Intelligence Usage section. Faculty are directed to communicate course-specific expectations regarding AI use, ranging from prohibited use to permitted use with attribution or broad instructional use, ensuring students understand expectations at the beginning of the course. Additionally, the ISU's Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching provides faculty resources on AI in teaching and learning, including guidance on course-level AI policies, syllabus statements, academic integrity and responsible instructional use of generative AI technologies.

The University of Northern Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Iowa each bring their guidance and other resources together for students and faculty in a dedicated AI hub to

ensure appropriate measures are in force to safeguard student learning, achievement and competency.

While AI presents legitimate challenges for measuring student learning, it is also an increasingly important tool in the workplaces and professions our graduates will enter. As a result, Iowa's public universities are pursuing a balanced approach: maintaining rigorous academic standards while ensuring students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to use AI effectively, ethically and responsibly.

Rather than avoiding AI, our institutions are teaching students how to leverage these technologies appropriately, understand their limitations, evaluate their outputs critically, and apply them in ways that enhance, rather than replace, human judgment, creativity, expertise and problem-solving. The goal is not simply AI literacy, but workforce readiness grounded in discipline-specific knowledge and enduring human capabilities.

For example, the University of Iowa offers an 18-semester-hour undergraduate Certificate in Artificial Intelligence open to students in every major. All certificate students complete a common AI Fundamentals course that pairs hands-on experience with AI tools with critical discussion of ethical and responsible use, followed by electives drawn from multiple departments that range from technical coursework to the study of AI's impact on society and the professions. Beyond the certificate, all UI students have access to Microsoft Copilot Chat, a university-supported AI tool with enterprise data protection. Rhetoric faculty have added AI literacy to their courses, so nearly every new undergraduate discusses AI in their first year. In addition, a module on AI has been added to the Success at Iowa course that is completed by all incoming students. This module introduces new students to the AI tools available at the university, responsible use of the tools, and how AI can help or hurt their learning. The Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology also offers pilot programs that help faculty test AI-enabled tools in their courses while the Center for Teaching offers workshops on how to teach with AI.

Iowa State University provides yet another example by supporting AI literacy and workforce preparation through a growing ecosystem that includes the Applied AI Minor, a Master's Degree in Artificial Intelligence, a Graduate Certificate in Responsible AI for Practitioners, Translational AI (TrAC) microcredentials, and courses such as Artificial Intelligence and Writing (ENGL 2220) that emphasize generative AI literacy, creativity, and ethics.

Additionally, as manager and operating contractor of Ames National Laboratory, Iowa State University is advancing the application of artificial intelligence to national scientific priorities through collaborations involving advanced materials, critical minerals, manufacturing and scientific discovery. Iowa State researchers recently led four projects and participated in four additional projects selected for the U.S. Department of Energy's Genesis Mission, a national initiative integrating AI, supercomputing, scientific instruments and advanced research workflows.

Finally, because AI technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, universities must continuously evaluate and refine their approaches to instruction, assessment, and academic integrity. Iowa's public universities regularly review and update their policies, practices and curricula to address emerging developments, maintain confidence in the validity of academic assessments, and ensure students graduate with relevant, current skills. One example of how our universities are continuously evaluating and evolving the adoption of this new technology can be found at the University of Northern Iowa. UNI has established an AI Advisory Board, charged with launching an AI literacy framework and guiding the content of AI guidelines, AI infusion into teaching and learning, and professional development for academic affairs, among other responsibilities.

Our ongoing commitment ensures that Iowa's universities remain both academically rigorous and forward-looking, preparing graduates who can succeed in a rapidly changing workforce while preserving the integrity, quality and value of a university degree.

6. Safeguarding Research Integrity from Foreign Malign Influence

America's economic strength, technological dominance and national security depend on the integrity of its research enterprise and its continued ability to develop new knowledge, technologies and scientific breakthroughs. Iowa's public universities play an important role in that mission, conducting research that advances innovation, drives economic growth, supports critical industries and contributes to the nation's security and global competitiveness.

The importance of protecting that research from foreign malign influence, unauthorized access and other security threats is well understood by Iowa's policymakers, university leaders and research administrators. Iowa's public universities are committed to conducting research in an environment defined by transparency, accountability, ethical conduct and strict adherence to state and federal requirements.

State law reinforces these protections by requiring transparency, reporting, and divestment related to investments involving companies owned, controlled or influenced by foreign adversarial nations. The Board of Regents publicly reports on scrutinized companies, divestment activities, and applicable holdings in accordance with Iowa law. These reports, prepared and submitted on behalf of Iowa's public universities, can be found here under "Divestment Reports."

That commitment is also reflected in Executive Order 18, signed by Governor Kim Reynolds on February 10, 2026. As a result of the order, the Regents reviewed a comprehensive report of all gifts, contracts, agreements, arrangements and exchanges between Iowa's regent institutions and Chinese educational institutions over the past 5 years. The purpose of this review is to strengthen transparency, identify potential areas of risk and reduce vulnerabilities that could be exploited by foreign adversaries.

In addition, Iowa's public universities fully comply with Section 117 of the Higher Education Act and other applicable federal disclosure requirements concerning foreign gifts and contracts. Compliance is supported through established governance structures, internal controls, regular

reporting processes and institutional oversight mechanisms designed to ensure timely and accurate disclosure of foreign funding and relationships.

The leaders of Iowa's public universities and their research enterprises are held to high professional and ethical standards, pursuant to various existing policies, including the University of Iowa's Ethics in Research policy, Iowa State University's Research Objectives policy and other guidance from their Office of Research Ethics as well as the Board of Regents' policy on academic freedom. Iowa's public universities do not accept gifts, agreements or arrangements that compromise academic independence or compliance obligations. Financial interest disclosure forms are required for persons conducting research and are managed according to Conflict of Interest Policies, like the University of Iowa's policy found here. Any gifts with problematic conditions or funding that unduly influences academic and research activities are prohibited by these existing policies. Board Policy 2.2 further requires public disclosure of foreign-source funding and gifts exceeding $50,000, ensuring transparency and enabling public review of significant foreign financial relationships.

Research security extends beyond financial transparency. Iowa's public universities require researchers and research personnel to comply with rigorous federal, state and institutional requirements governing research integrity, data protection, intellectual property, export controls, and cybersecurity. For example, the University of Iowa's Research Security Program Policy establishes a comprehensive framework to evaluate research security and cybersecurity threats. Other efforts, like the UI Research Policy on Foreign Talent Recruitment Programs and the Responsible Conduct of Research Training are designed to protect research facilities, sensitive information, critical technologies and university networks from unauthorized access or inappropriate foreign influence.

Collectively, these measures create multiple layers of oversight intended to identify, assess and mitigate potential risks associated with foreign influence while preserving the open exchange of ideas that is essential to academic inquiry. Iowa's public universities remain committed to fostering legitimate international collaboration while ensuring that partnerships are conducted transparently, responsibly, and in a manner consistent with state and federal laws, national security interests and the protection of valuable research assets.

7. Supporting the Prosperity of Iowa and the Nation

Iowa's public universities and the Board of Regents are careful stewards of the investments made by taxpayers and by the students and families who enroll in our institutions. As described above, through institutional commitments, Board policies, state laws and federal guidance, the Iowa Board of Regents affirms its position as a national leader in higher education. We will continue our careful attention to workforce-aligned academic programs, high-quality research and service to the state and nation. Underpinning this work are the core principles of excellence, accountability, transparency and academic freedom to ensure the course is set for meeting the challenges of today and tomorrow, while respecting the history and foundation set by those who came before us.