

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## THE BEST PUBLIC COLLEGES IN THE U.S.

*UCLA, Michigan, UNC lead the way among state schools in the Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings*

By Melissa Korn  
September 26, 2017

Despite limited state support and more crowded classrooms, nearly two dozen public schools cracked the top 100 in this year's [Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings](#).

These institutions proved they could offer a lower-cost option, often to a more diverse student body, and provide comparable outcomes to the private schools that dominate the top of the charts.

The University of California, Los Angeles was the highest-ranked state school, coming in at No. 25. It was followed by the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor at No. 27 and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill at No. 33.

Twenty-one public universities made it into the top 100 of the WSJ/THE rankings, and eight reached the top 50.

The University of California system has four campuses among the top 10 public schools. Besides first-place UCLA, Berkeley comes in at fourth, followed by Davis, sixth, and San Diego, seventh.

Public universities get relatively little funding from state coffers these days – even many of the states that have put money into higher education in recent years are still spending significantly less than they did before the 2008 financial crisis.

Nationwide, state educational appropriations per full-time-equivalent student fell 15 percent between fiscal 2008 and fiscal 2016, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. In that same period, enrollment rose 8.5 percent and net tuition revenue for public higher education jumped 35 percent.

Funding challenges often lead schools to hold larger classes. The best student-faculty ratio for any public university in the top 100 was 12 to 1, at the University of Michigan, Purdue University (No. 43 overall) and William & Mary (No. 100). That ratio is in the mid-single digits for many elite private institutions.

At the other end of the spectrum, 21 of the more than 1,000 schools in the WSJ/THE rankings had a student-faculty ratio of at least 25 to 1, and they were all public schools, including much of the California State University system.

With minimal state support and, in many cases, caps on tuition increases, public universities tend to spend far less on academics than their private, nonprofit counterparts.

UCLA spent \$42,510 per student on instruction and academic services, adjusting for regional price differences with data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. That is less than half the adjusted per-student academic spending at private schools Stanford University, Yale University, Washington University in St. Louis or Vanderbilt University, all of which landed higher in the overall WSJ/THE ranking.

UCLA's per-student academic spending is the highest of any public university in the top 100; the next highest is at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, at \$34,760.

High spending doesn't necessarily lead to a strong education. Efficiency, the adoption of digital learning aids and online lectures can lower costs without hurting outcomes.

The University of Michigan spent \$26,840 per student on academics, but scored far better than UCLA on student engagement (No. 33 versus No. 119) and had a higher ranking for outcomes (No. 14 versus No. 22).

The WSJ/THE rankings determine engagement by weighing the breadth of course offerings alongside student responses to survey questions about how challenging the curriculum is and real-world application of academic ideas.

Outcomes are calculated based on graduation rates, reputation, and salary and debt data for recent graduates.

"I'm gratified to hear that we spend less money per student, so long as we are producing strong outcomes," says University of Michigan President Mark Schlissel. "We have strong incentives to be efficient and effective."

Michigan was "quite early and quite consistent in disinvesting in public higher education," Dr. Schlissel says. The university gets roughly the same number of total dollars, not adjusted for inflation, as it did in 1997 – and its student population has grown 20 percent in that time, he says. As a result, he estimates, more than three-quarters of academic spending comes from tuition funds. In many years, tuition has increased at a rate higher than inflation.

As Michigan has boosted tuition, however, it has also invested in financial aid, Dr. Schlissel says. "We don't want our success to come at the cost of access to higher education."

Dr. Schlissel points to economies of scale and breadth of research opportunities at the institution, as well as a strong alumni network that helps students secure internships and jobs, for the high marks in this year's WSJ/THE rankings.

Several other top public universities also punch above their weight in terms of student outcomes, passing some exclusive private institutions.

The University of Florida, for instance, ranks 58th overall but notches the No. 30 spot for outcomes, thanks to a six-year graduation rate of 87 percent and low student-loan default rates. (It lands ahead of Georgetown University and New York University, which are 31st and 48th on outcomes, respectively, and 31st and 29th overall.)

University of Florida President Kent Fuchs notes that the state allocates funds based on factors like graduation rates and job placement, so there are clear incentives for the school to see its graduates fare well. Also, low tuition and state-backed financial aid lead to minimal debt burdens for students.

Dr. Fuchs says that while the school has been successful in getting full-time, first-time students to the finish line in six years, he's now focused on raising four-year graduation rates with tweaks to tuition structures and the curriculum that could encourage students to make it through faster.

"It's for the benefit of the students," he says. "We want them to graduate and get out."

The University of Maryland, No. 82 overall, came in at No. 37 for outcomes. And Texas A&M University, No. 93 overall, was 59th in outcomes.

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