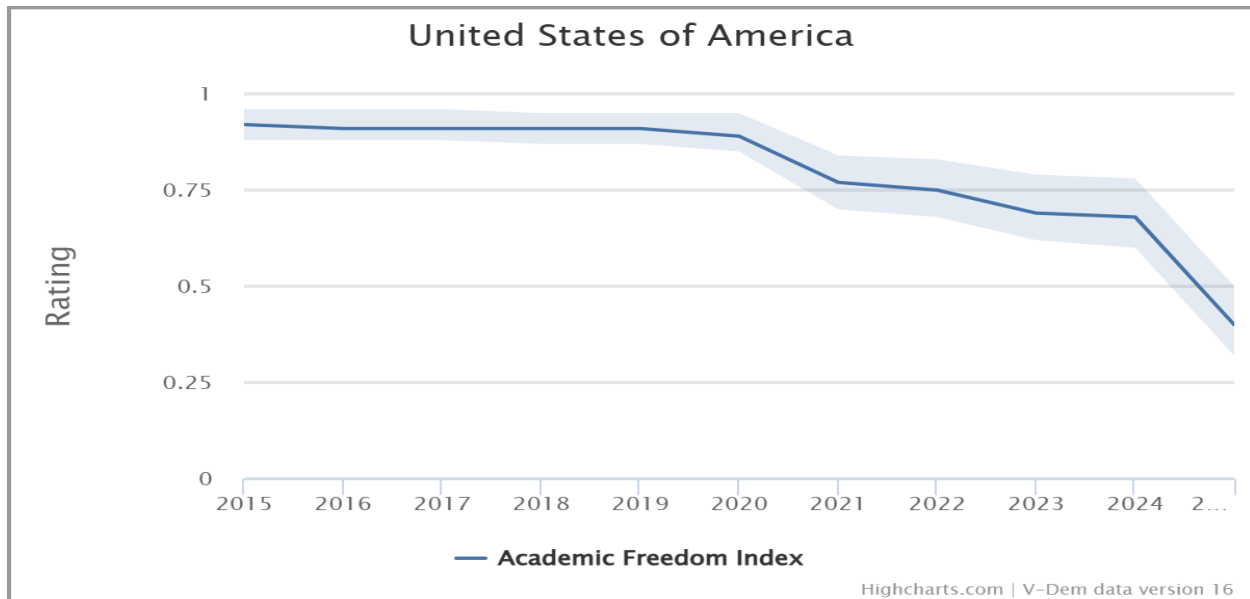


INTRODUCTION

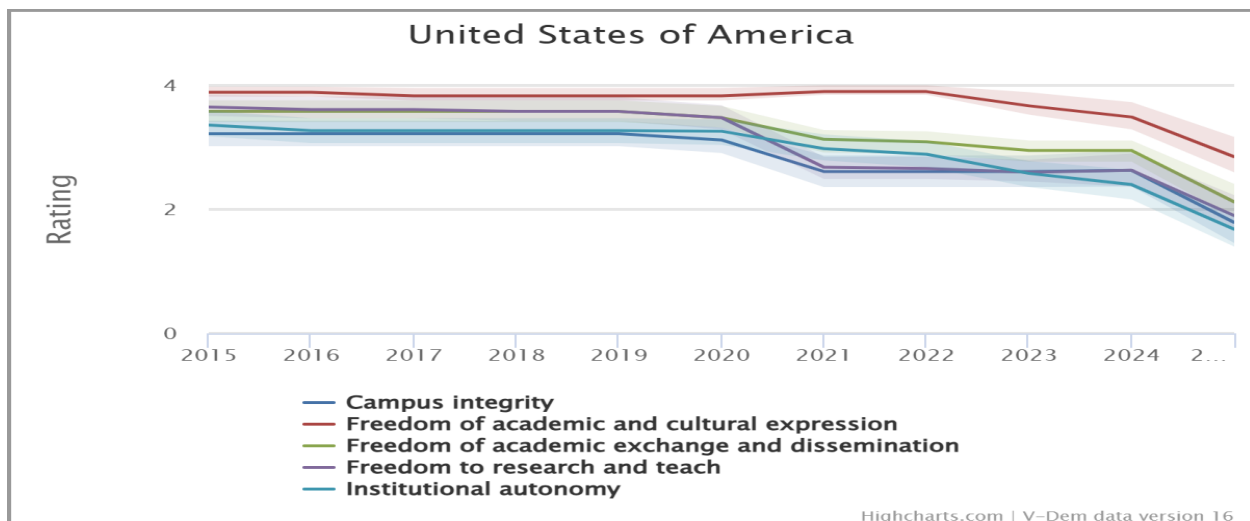
1. Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of higher education institutions dedicated to protecting threatened scholars, preventing attacks on higher education communities and promoting academic freedom worldwide. SAR has Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC (2013), and welcomes the opportunity provided by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights to comment on conditions relating to academic freedom and attacks on higher education communities in the United States of America (US).
2. This submission updates and supplements the information in the submission prepared by SAR in April 2025, based on the substantial deterioration of academic freedom in the US in the year since. The descriptions of events and analysis contained in that submission are reasserted here, and all legal standards articulated in the initial submission apply equally and are incorporated by reference.

DISCUSSION

3. Since April 2025, when SAR shared its original submission to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, the situation for higher education in the United States has continued to deteriorate. The eleven months that followed that submission saw a flood of actions by the executive branch and state authorities that undermined university autonomy including extensive restrictions on academic content, increased monitoring, covert recording, scrutiny of classroom expression (which has triggered widespread reports of self-censorship), and rising reports of faculty members losing their positions following public and political pressure campaigns.
4. According to the Academic Freedom Index (AFi), since 2020, academic freedom has declined dramatically in the US. Whereas prior to 2020, the US ranked in the top decile with respect to academic freedom, by the end of 2025, the country had fallen substantially below the 40th percentile.¹



5. The AFi shows that the US's decline in academic freedom is consistent and statistically significant across all five indicators analyzed: freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, freedom of academic and cultural expression, institutional autonomy, freedom to research and teach, and campus integrity. For instance, institutional autonomy deteriorated by 50% from 2015 to 2025. The 2026 Update of the index points out that the drop in institutional autonomy has been remarkably rapid in comparison to other countries experiencing democratic decline.²



Executive & State Actions

6. The current US administration and state governments have continued efforts to pressure universities into political or ideological compliance. These include new executive actions targeting specific institutions; state-level legislation restricting university autonomy, academic freedom, and free expression on campus; and immigration actions targeting international scholars and students, including actions apparently based on the individual's national origin or nonviolent expression.
7. The Trump administration targeted several institutions individually, threatening to strip them of federal research funding if they did not accede to demands regarding governance, curriculum, and other aspects of campus life. While some institutions refused, notably **Harvard**, six universities made deals with the federal government: the **University of Pennsylvania**,³ **Columbia University**,⁴ **Brown University**,⁵ the **University of Virginia**,⁶ **Cornell University**,⁷ and **Northwestern University**.⁸ Most of the deals involved the payment of a financial sum, as well as a commitment to make policy changes and to submit to unilateral and unspecified government oversight over the institution's compliance with the government's terms. The universities that made deals included:
8. In October 2025, the US administration announced the so-called "Compact for Excellence in Higher Education," which pressured universities into committing to the administration's political agenda in exchange for preferential access to federal research funds.⁹ The terms of the compact include provisions that would undermine or threaten institutional autonomy and academic freedom, including: requiring that signatories commit to changing governance structures to "transform[] or abolish[] institutional units" deemed hostile to "conservative ideas"; prohibiting employees from making statements on behalf of the university; and capping international enrollment and screening international students for "anti-American values."

The compact—which the US administration originally presented to nine institutions before extending it to all US universities and colleges¹⁰—appeared to be an attempt to move beyond pressuring individual institutions by nationalizing the administration's ideological demands for alleged reforms in exchange for access to federal funding. No universities signed the compact; had they done so, the impacts on academic freedom and university autonomy would have been dire,¹¹ and could have led to a two-tiered higher education system that privileged those institutions that aligned themselves with the administration.

9. On February 27, 2026, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that the Department of Defense would cut academic ties with 21 higher education institutions in retaliation for their allegedly promoting ideas and discourse which the administration disfavored; what

the Secretary called “woke indoctrination.” It was unclear exactly what activities the Department of Defense was cutting, and, as of early March, the Department had not communicated directly with any of the universities affected.¹²

10. State executives, state legislatures, and politically-appointed university governing bodies developed new legislation and policies undermining university autonomy, eroding tenure protections;¹³ censoring teaching, research, and discourse on campus; and creating opportunities for external actors to influence university decisions. Among these:
 - On February 5, 2026, Oklahoma governor Kevin Stitt issued an executive order that largely eliminated tenure at public higher education institutions across the state.¹⁴
 - On December 11, 2025, the South Dakota Board of Regents introduced a new policy requiring that faculty at the state’s six public higher education institutions undergo a post-tenure performance review every five years. Faculty members assessed as not meeting expectations will have their tenure status removed. Significantly, public statements regarding the new policy indicated that external pressure contributed to its development.¹⁵
 - On June 20, 2025, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed into law a bill that strengthened the authority of public university governing boards over curriculum and weakened faculty governance by reducing the size of faculty senates.¹⁶ That same day, Abbott also signed into law legislation limiting expressive activity at the state’s public colleges and universities.¹⁷
11. In total, during 2025, 23 states passed laws or policies that undermined autonomy and censored higher education.¹⁸
12. US executive actions and state-level policies put international and undocumented students and scholars in a particularly precarious position. In 2025, Presidential Proclamations 10949 and 10998 either fully or partially suspended nationals from 39 countries from entering the United States.¹⁹ The travel bans, combined with a new policy mandating that US immigration officials review the social media accounts of all foreign students applying for visas to study in the United States,²⁰ contributed to a 35.6% drop in new international student visas during the summer of 2025.²¹ Two states—Texas and Florida—separately directed universities to temporarily stop processing visas for new foreign workers.²² At the time of writing in March 2026, Iowa was attempting to do the same.²³
13. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials detained and initiated removal proceedings against international scholars and students working in the United States, apparently based on their national origin or nonviolent expression. For example, on

November 22, 2025, ICE officials arrested Vahid Abedini, the Farzaneh Family Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies at the **University of Oklahoma**, at the airport while on his way to Washington, D.C. for a Middle East Studies Association conference. At the time of his arrest, Abedini was in the US legally on an H1-B visa, originally at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where Abedini had worked as a visiting assistant professor, and subsequently at the University of Oklahoma. Abedini had no criminal record. He was held and questioned for unknown reasons for three days before being released on November 25.

Restrictions on Intramural and Extramural Academic Expression

14. In a number of states, public university systems and individual universities developed new policies restricting intramural expression (meaning educational expression within the classroom, lab, or other traditional educational settings) and extramural expression (meaning expression within one's area of expertise or study, outside traditional educational spaces) expression. In many cases, new laws and policies were vaguely worded and overly broad, increasing the likelihood that faculty and students would self-censor to avoid sanctions.²⁴ State-level action restricting academic content included:
 - In early 2026, a statewide working group convened by the Florida Board of Governors introduced a new introduction to sociology textbook that effectively excised material related to media and technology, global inequality, race and ethnicity, social stratification, or gender, sex and sexuality.²⁵ The working group included four sociologists and four Board of Governors staff members. Earlier, in October 2025, Florida education commissioner Anastasios Kamoutsas informed one group member, a sociology professor at **Florida Southwestern State College (FSW)**, of his immediate removal from the working group, accusing him of promoting “gender ideology” in his courses.²⁶
 - In late 2025 in Texas, the **Texas Tech University** and **Texas A&M University** systems introduced new policies requiring faculty members to seek approval for course material related to race, gender, and sexual identity.²⁷ At Texas A&M, the new policy resulted in the cancellation of six courses and the closure of the Women's and Gender Studies program.²⁸
15. In a number of cases, students reported in-class statements by faculty members to university administrators or elected officials, seeking to have those faculty members disciplined or fired. Some universities encouraged such reporting. For example, the Texas A&M Board of Regents approved a new “24/7 reporting mechanism” that encouraged students to report what they deem to be “inaccurate or misleading course content.”²⁹ In February 2026, the **University of North Carolina** briefly introduced a new policy officially allowing administrators to secretly record faculty members. The policy was

reversed two weeks later.³⁰

Such reports, often accompanied by unwanted media attention, public pressure campaigns, and threats by elected officials to pull university funding, led to faculty losing their positions.³¹ In some cases, faculty also faced threats of violence against them or their families. For example, in October 2025, Mark Bray, an assistant professor of history at Rutgers, fled the United States for Spain with his family after a public campaign against him, including death threats, for his academic work on Antifa, a left-wing anti-fascist, anti-racist political movement that opposes far-right ideologies.³²

16. Public pressure campaigns leading to the suspension or firing of faculty members escalated in the wake of the on-campus killing of political activist Charlie Kirk on September 10, 2025. Kirk was the cofounder of Turning Point USA, a nonprofit group that advocates for conservative values on high school, college, and university campuses.³³ Following Kirk's killing, at least 60 faculty members and teachers faced professional retaliation for comments that they made that were critical of Charlie Kirk or his views.³⁴
17. Other cases in which faculty members lost their positions in the face of public pressure campaigns included:³⁵
 - In January 2026, the **University of Arkansas** rescinded an offer to serve as the dean of its law school that had been made to a law professor and associate law school dean at the University of South Carolina's Joseph F. Rice School of Law. The university stated that its decision to rescind the offer had been informed by criticism from elected officials about the professor's signing of an amicus brief filed with the U.S. Supreme Court which supported transgender students' right to play on sports teams aligned with their gender identity.³⁶
 - In October 2025, **Indiana University's School of Social Work** banned a lecturer from teaching one of her classes after a student complained to Indiana Senator Jim Banks about a graphic that she showed in class explaining the concept of "white supremacy." The lecturer later returned to teaching after being formally sanctioned and required to have a university monitor placed in each of her classes.³⁷
 - In June 2025, **Georgetown University** removed a professor of Islamic Studies and the Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization from his position as chair of his department following a politicized outcry over his social media posts regarding US military strikes on Iran.³⁸
18. Universities cancelled or censored numerous events, conferences, or publications related to disfavored or controversial topics such as abortion, immigration, race, or gender, in response to public or political pressure, including:

- On February 11, 2026, the **University of North Texas** canceled an art exhibit that addressed immigration and criticized US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, apparently because of concerns over political repercussions for the university, including the potential loss of funding.³⁹
- On January 23, 2026, a Turning Point USA Campaign including appeals to **Texas Tech** System Chancellor Brandon Creighton prompted the cancellation of a talk by a retired doctor and abortion rights activist.⁴⁰
- On December 1, 2025, the **University of Alabama**'s Office of Student Media canceled two student publications—one a fashion and wellness magazine, the other focused on black culture—in connection with non-binding US Department of Justice guidance recommending restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion activities on campus.⁴¹
- **Weber State University** informed campus event speakers that their presentations must refrain from using certain words or addressing certain topics (such as, diversity, equity, and inclusion; anti-racism; bias; critical race theory; implicit bias; oppression; intersectionality; prohibited discriminatory practices; racial privilege; and promoting stereotypes based on personal identity characteristics) in order to comply with Utah House Bill 261⁴² banning diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Speakers pulled out of multiple events in response.⁴³

RECOMMENDATIONS

SAR respectfully reiterates the recommendations asserted in our original UPR submission, urging UN member states to call on the US and individual state governments to affirm their commitment to academic freedom and related human rights by:

- a. Immediately reversing laws and policies which undermine academic freedom and university autonomy, including policies which undermine universities' self-governance and control over finances, curricula, teaching, research, campus discourse, and personnel and admissions decisions.
- b. Reversing current policies targeting universities on political or ideological grounds, and refraining from such policies in the future.
- c. Adopting affirmative measures to protect academic freedom, based on relevant constitutional standards and international human rights norms including the First Amendment to the US Constitution and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the US is a party, and Articles 13 and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, to which the US is a

signatory.

Likewise, SAR respectfully calls on US higher education institutions and associations, in partnership with administrators, faculty and students, to:

- a. Refrain from complicity in violations of academic freedom, including anticipatory, overbroad, or excessive compliance with government demands that infringe on academic freedom or the rights of members of their communities, and failure to defend against those infringements through available legal, policy, or administrative channels.
- b. Adopt policies and practices to strengthen local and institutional protections for academic freedom, and which promote greater understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders as articulated in, among others, the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom.⁴⁴

SAR also respectfully calls on higher education institutions and associations outside the US, in partnership with administrators, faculty and students, to:

- a. Offer solidarity and material support to US-based higher education institutions, scholars, and students including through events, publications, and talks calling out laws, policies and rhetoric undermining academic freedom in the US;
- b. Partner with US-based institutions, scholars, and students through joint conferences, research projects, and for fellowship opportunities, especially for those most vulnerable to government or public pressures, including individuals on visas or other temporary immigration status, those working in disciplines or topics disfavored by federal or state officials, or those suffering credible threats of violence or harm;
- c. Undertake research, monitoring, reporting, publication, and events for higher education audiences, policy-makers, and the general public, to help reverse the erosion of respect for academic freedom in the US and to help prevent the methods and policies of erosion of academic freedom in the US from becoming models that might be used to undermine academic freedom in their countries.

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² *Ibid.*

³ Alan Blinder. Penn Agrees to Limit Participation of Transgender Athletes. *The New York Times*. July 1, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/01/us/penn-title-ix-transgender-swimmer-trump.html>.

⁴ Sharon Otterman, Columbia's Deal With Trump: What We Know, *The New York Times*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/23/nyregion/columbia-trump-settlement-what-to-know.html>.

⁵ Associated Press, Brown University strikes agreement with White House to restore lost federal funding, *NPR*, July 31, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/07/31/nx-s1-5486581/brown-university-agreement-restore-federal-funding>.

⁶ Michael C. Bender and Michael S. Schmidt. University of Virginia Makes Deal With White House to Halt Investigations, *New York Times*, October 22, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/22/us/politics/university-of-virginia-trump-agreement.html>.

- ⁷ Stephanie Saul and Alan Blinder, Cornell Reaches Deal With Trump Administration to Restore Research Funds, *New York Times*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/07/us/cornell-deal-trump-administration.html>.
- ⁸ Michael C. Bender, Northwestern Agrees to a Deal With Trump Administration, *New York Times*, November 28, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/28/us/politics/northwestern-deal-trump-administration.html>.
- ⁹ Susan Svrluga, Danielle Douglas-Gabriel and Emily Davies, Colleges weigh whether to sign on to Trump plan or forgo federal benefits, *New York Times*, October 3, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2025/10/03/trump-administration-college-funding-compact/>.
- ¹⁰ Katherine Knott, Deciphering Trump's Compact Invitation to All of Higher Ed, *Inside Higher Ed*, October 15, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/2025/10/15/trump-opens-compact-all-higher-ed-now-what>.
- ¹¹ Amanda Shanor and Serena Mayeri, A Brief Legal Analysis of the Department of Education's Proposed Compact for Higher Education, *Knight First Amendment Institute*, October 15, 2025, <https://knightcolumbia.org/blog/a-brief-legal-analysis-of-the-department-of-educations-proposed-compact-for-higher-education>.
- ¹² Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (SAR AFMP), Multiple Institutions, February 27, 2026, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-02-27-multiple-institutions/>.
- ¹³ Faculty tenure is a significant procedural safeguard for academic freedom and the production of public-facing knowledge, as it protects scholars pursuing new, innovative and potentially sensitive or controversial ideas from retaliation and loss of position. While state education officials may have the authority to revise tenure policies, they should do so in wide consultation with the higher education community and they have an obligation to ensure that any revisions do not erode protections for academic freedom.
- ¹⁴ SAR AFMP, Oklahoma Public Higher Education System, February 5, 2026, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-02-05-oklahoma-public-higher-education-system/>.
- ¹⁵ SAR AFMP, Multiple Institutions, December 12, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-12-11-multiple-institutions/>.
- ¹⁶ SAR AFMP, Multiple Institutions, June 20, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-06-20-multiple-institutions-2/>.
- ¹⁷ SAR AFMP, Multiple Institutions, June 20, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-06-20-multiple-institutions/>.
- ¹⁸ PEN America, *Expanding the Web of Control: America's Censored Campuses 2025*, January 15, 2026, <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-campuses-25-web-of-control/>.
- ¹⁹ US Department of State, Suspension of Visa Issuance to Foreign Nationals to Protect the Security of the United States, Updated February 2, 2026, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/suspension-of-visa-issuance-to-foreign-nationals-to-protect-the-security-of-the-united-states.html>.
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- ²⁴ AAUP, Against Anticipatory Obedience, January 2025, <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/policy-statements/against-anticipatory-obedience>.
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- ²⁶ SAR AFMP, Florida SouthWestern State College, October 30, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-10-30-florida-southwestern-state-college/>.
- ²⁷ SAR AFMP, Texas Tech University, December 1, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-12-01-texas-tech-university/>. SAR AFMP, Texas A&M University, November 13, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-11-13-texas-am-university/>.
- ²⁸ Texas A&M University Division of Marketing and Communications, Texas A&M University completes Spring 2026 course review to support academic integrity, January 30, 2026, <https://stories.tamu.edu/news/2026/01/30/texas->

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²⁹ SAR AFMP, Texas A&M University, November 13, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-11-13-texas-am-university/>.

³⁰ Emma Whitford, UNC Chancellor Scraps Secret Recording Policy, *Inside Higher Ed*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2026/03/02/unc-chancellor-scraps-secret-recording-policy>.

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³⁶ SAR AFMP, University of Arkansas, January 17, 2026, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-01-17-university-of-arkansas/>. SAR AFMP, University of Oklahoma, December 22, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-12-22-university-of-oklahoma/>.

³⁷ SAR AFMP, Indiana University, October 6, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-10-06-indiana-university/>. SAR AFMP, Texas A&M University, September 18, 2015, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-09-18-texas-am-university/>.

³⁸ SAR AFMP, Georgetown University, June 26, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-06-26-georgetown-university/>.

³⁹ SAR AFMP, University of North Texas, February 11, 2026, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-02-11-university-of-north-texas/>.

⁴⁰ SAR AFMP, Texas Tech University, January 23, 2026, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2026-01-23-texas-tech-university/>.

⁴¹ SAR AFMP, University of Alabama, December 1, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-12-01-university-of-alabama/>.

⁴² SAR AFMP, Utah System of Higher Education, January 30, 2024, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-01-30-utah-system-of-higher-education/>.

⁴³ SAR AFMP, Weber State University, November 20, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-11-20-weber-state-university/>. SAR AFMP, Weber State University, September 28, 2025, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-09-28-weber-state-university/>.

⁴⁴ A/HRC/56/CRP.2.