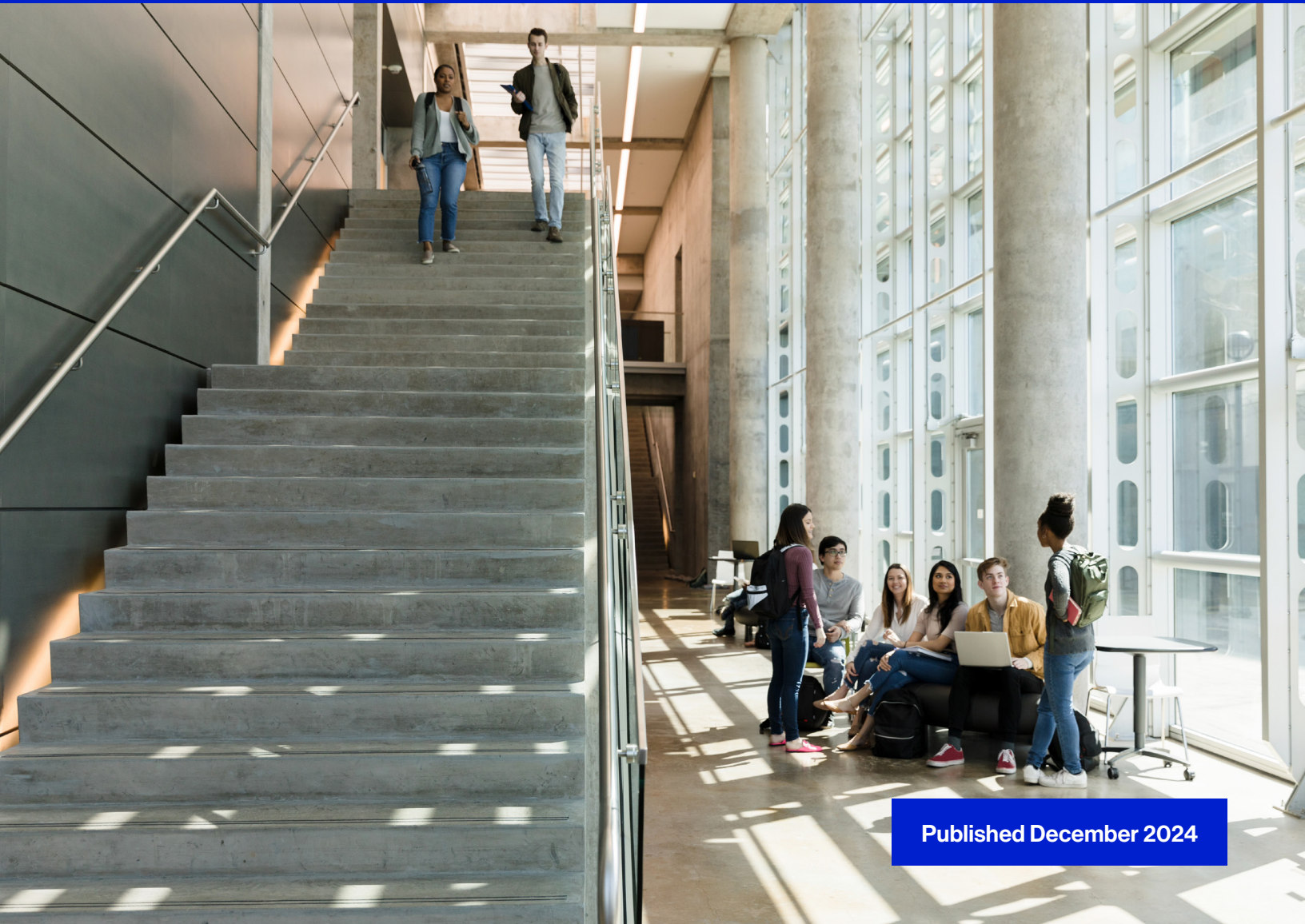


Top Risks Report: Insights for Higher Education



Each year, United Educators (UE) members share their institution's most pressing risks in the Top Risks Survey. This report reflects responses from 194 colleges and universities that completed the survey between August and December 2024.

Key insights from the survey responses:

- **Enrollment** regained its spot as the top risk in higher education; 71% of respondents listed it as a top risk, increasing from 67% last year. **Data Security**, ranked first last year, dropped to second this year with the biggest decline from 73% of respondents to 56%.
- **Regulatory and Legal Compliance (Non-VAWA/Title IX)** saw the biggest increase, jumping 8 percentage points to 29% of respondents, or fifth overall. This increase may reflect federal and state governments' increased attention on higher education.
- Nine risks also ranked among last year's top risks, suggesting a consistent risk landscape. Three risks are new to this year's list: **Public Safety** was ninth (11th in 2023), **General Premises Safety** tied for 10th (19th in 2023), and **Political and Societal Pressures** tied for 10th (new in this year's survey).
- Because of the changing political, social, and economic landscape, **External Pressures** split into two distinct risks this year: **External Economic Pressures** (20th) and **Political and Societal Pressures** (tied for 10th). If **External Pressures** still counted a single risk, it would have ranked eighth.
- Risks were mostly consistent across all [Carnegie Classification groupings](#). However, research universities were more likely to cite **Data Security**, **Athletics**, and **Academic Research** as top risks and less likely to cite **Enrollment** and **Facilities and Deferred Maintenance** as top risks.

Top 10 Risks

1. Enrollment
2. Data Security
3. Operational Pressures
4. Recruitment and Hiring
5. Regulatory and Legal Compliance (Non-VAWA/Title IX)
6. Facilities and Deferred Maintenance
7. Student Mental Health
8. Funding
9. Public Safety
- 10.* General Premises Safety
- 10.* Title IX
- 10.* Political and Societal Pressures

* Three risks tied for 10th.

This year's survey also asked respondents to rate seven **emerging risks** drawn from topics of growing concern even if they were not identified as "top" risks in past surveys. **Adversarial Regulation** and **Political Climate and Instability** were perceived as the two most significant emerging risks, reflecting public and governmental skepticism over higher education.

Use the data below to start discussions about your institution's top risks and benchmark against peers. Each topic includes links to UE resources, some of which require a member login.

Top 10 Risks: Higher Education

Percentages in this report show the percent of respondents identifying a given risk. Because respondents listed five risks, percentages do not total 100%.

01. Enrollment 71%

Risks affecting new student admission and retention of current students

UE Resources:

[Reputational Risk Toolkit](#)

[Avoid Misrepresentations to Prospective and Current Students](#)

[Risk Management Steps in Response to the Supreme Court's Admissions Ruling](#)

[Ensure Integrity in Your Admissions Process to Help Avoid Claims](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Launch innovative academic programs aligned to market demand.
- Update online program and course strategy and offerings.
- Change discounting and pricing strategies.
- Reduce admission selectivity.
- Strengthen relationships with local schools and transfer partners.

02. Data Security 56%

Information technology risks such as data breaches, phishing, accidental disclosure of personal data, ransomware, and hacking

UE Resources:

[Data Security Course Collection](#)

[Crisis Response: A Library of Tabletop Exercises](#)

[Generative Artificial Intelligence Use Policy or Guidelines for Employees](#)

[Don't Take the Bait: Defending Institutional Data From Phishing](#)

[Manage the Risks of Remote Learning in Higher Education](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Increase compensation to hire and retain cybersecurity staff.
- Train on data security more frequently.
- Create or update a data governance strategy.
- Conduct third-party risk assessments.
- Practice ransomware and network outage response plans.
- Implement artificial intelligence use guidelines.

03. Operational Pressures 42%

Risks related to financial stability, the institution's business model, and constraints on the institution's processes

UE Resources:

[Enterprise Risk Management Resource Collection](#)

[Guide to Manage Risks Associated With Program Change](#)

[Checklist: Program Reduction or Discontinuance](#)

[Checklist: Change of Institutional Control](#)

[Checklist: Institutional Closure](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Consider partnerships, mergers, and acquisitions.
- Evaluate budget model and budgeting practices.
- Review tuition pricing model and financial aid strategy.
- Expand auxiliary revenue streams.
- Reorganize institutional operations.
- Improve cost controls.

Top 10 Risks: Higher Education

04. Recruitment and Hiring 31%

Risks related to maintaining a talented staff and faculty workforce

UE Resources:

- [Employee Offboarding Guide](#)
- [Using Artificial Intelligence Tools in the HR Lifecycle: Risks to Consider](#)
- [Considerations in Skills-Based Hiring](#)
- [Checklist: Assessing Your Employee Performance Evaluation System](#)
- [Avoid Sex-Based Faculty Pay Discrimination](#)
- [Employee Burnout Is a Risk Management Issue](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Increase pay, benefits, and work schedule flexibility.
- Conduct a compensation study and act on its findings.
- Outsource administrative functions to third parties.
- Refocus performance evaluations on engagement and career growth.
- Conduct offboarding interviews to find ways to improve the employee experience

05. Regulatory and Legal Compliance (Non-VAWA/Title IX) 29%

Risks involving noncompliance with federal, state, and local regulations and other elective accountability authorities

UE Resources:

- [Identify Barriers to Completing Mandatory Employee Training](#)
- [Know Your Support Animals](#)
- [Manage Faculty Who Resist Disability Accommodations Requests](#)
- [Understand Your Duty to Make Technology Accessible](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Centralize compliance functions.
- Seek specialized outside counsel.
- Engage regulatory bodies for guidance.
- Update electronic privacy and record retention policies.
- Evaluate compliance policies and procedures in complex areas like athletics and research.

06. Facilities and Deferred Maintenance 28%

Risks concerning outdated facilities and new construction, including inadequate facilities to achieve the institution's mission

UE Resources:

- [Slips and Falls Resource Collection](#)
- [Checklist: A Guide for Reviewing Contracts](#)
- [Reduce Serious Injuries in Residence Halls Through Informed Facility Management](#)
- [Take Inventory of Your Off-Campus Real Estate](#)
- [Adopt Tree Assessment and Removal Policies and Practices](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Conduct routine campus hazard walkthroughs.
- Implement a hazard reporting system.
- Launch a capital campaign for maintenance and new construction.
- Review and update facility maintenance contracts.
- Partner with property management and development companies.
- Create a prioritized or strategic deferred maintenance plan.

Top 10 Risks: Higher Education

07. Student Mental Health 21%

Risks related to students' mental and emotional well-being, including mental illnesses and suicide

UE Resources:

[Student Mental Health Resource Collection](#)
[Student Mental Health Course Collection](#)
[Crisis Response: A Library of Tabletop Exercises](#)
[ProResponse®](#)
[Prevent and Respond to Fentanyl Overdoses](#)
[Checklist: Evaluating Your Mental Health Policies](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Train faculty and staff to support students' mental health.
- Launch social skill development programs.
- Hire remote counseling providers to expand capacity.
- Create mental health programs to support marginalized identity groups.
- Assess and improve the institution's mental health infrastructure.
- Practice substance misuse and suicide response plans.

08. Funding 18%

Risks to core revenue streams

UE Resources:

[Enterprise Risk Management Resource Collection](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Invest in enrollment and retention strategies for new demographic groups.
- Increase philanthropic fundraising.
- Lobby state and federal governments for additional support.
- Launch or expand auxiliary revenue sources.
- Diversify sources of funded research.

09. Public Safety 16%

Risks related to crime and safety for the institution community and guests, including campus assailants

UE Resources:

[Campus Violence Resource Collection](#)
[Targeted Campus Violence: Recognize the Warning Signs](#)
[Crisis Response: A Library of Tabletop Exercises](#)
[ProResponse®](#)
[Alternative Response Approaches for Campus Safety](#)
[Checklist: Active Shooter Physical Security Measures](#)
[Checklist: Preventing and Preparing for Active Shooters on Campus](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Train employees on violence de-escalation.
- Increase monitoring of campus grounds and facilities.
- Implement new campus safety technologies.
- Enhance campus and building access security.
- Install barriers between campus and public areas.
- Practice crime and safety incident response.

Top 10 Risks: Higher Education

10. General Premises Safety 12%

TIE

Risk of injury and death caused by slips, trips, falls, and other campus hazards, including public use of facilities

UE Resources:

- [Slips and Falls Resource Collection](#)
- [Slips, Trips, and Falls Course Collection](#)
- [Checklist: Facilities Use Policy and Practices Review](#)
- [Checklist: A Guide for Reviewing Campus Contracts](#)
- [Take Care During Campus Repairs and Construction](#)
- [Checklist: Investigating Accidents Causing Personal Injury](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Train the campus community to report safety hazards.
- Improve snow and ice removal plans.
- Implement routine campus hazard walkthroughs.
- Review and update third-party contracting procedures.
- Review processes for investigating and documenting incidents.
- Analyze incidents and near misses for trends in vulnerabilities.

10. Title IX 12%

TIE

Risks related to sex discrimination

UE Resources:

- [Title IX and VAWA-Campus SaVE Act Resource Collection](#)
 - [Title IX Course Collection \(2024\)*](#)
 - [Title IX Course Collection \(2020\)*](#)
 - [ProResponse®](#)
 - [Campus Sexual Misconduct and Student Social Media Posts](#)
- *Due to the varied legal landscape, UE can't advise whether an institution should comply with the 2020 or 2024 regulations. Consult with expert legal counsel in your jurisdiction to make this determination.*

Mitigation Efforts:

- Ensure there's adequate staffing and compensation in the Title IX office.
- Elevate qualification standards of the lead Title IX coordinator.
- Expand Title IX training/information sessions.
- Identify third-party advisors to help with sensitive or complex Title IX investigations.
- Stay adaptable for further potential changes to Title IX regulations.

10. Political and Societal Pressures 12%

TIE

Risks related to public distrust of education, political attacks, and global instability

UE Resources:

- [Reputational Risk Toolkit](#)
- [Guide to Creating and Improving a Campus Crisis Communications Plan](#)
- [Establishing an Office for Diversity and Inclusion on Campus](#)
- [Preventing and Responding to Campus Hate and Bias Incidents](#)
- [When to Cancel or Alter Study Abroad Programs](#)

Mitigation Efforts:

- Communicate the value of education to students, families, and community leaders.
- Establish criteria for making institutional statements.
- Engage faculty and staff in public communication guidelines.
- Identify and monitor potentially controversial programs.
- Increase programming for the surrounding community.

Rank From 2020 Through 2024

| Rank | 2024 Top Risks | Rank in 2023 | Rank in 2022 | Rank in 2020-21 |
|------|---|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Enrollment | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | Data Security | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | Operational Pressures | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| 4 | Recruitment and Hiring | 3 | 3 | 14 |
| 5 | Regulatory and Legal Compliance (Non-Title IX/VAWA) | 8 | 7 | 7 |
| 6 | Facilities and Deferred Maintenance | 6T | 8 | 6 |
| 7 | Student Mental Health | 5 | 5 | New in 2022 |
| 8 | Funding | 6T | 11 | 5 |
| 9 | Public Safety | 11 | 9 | 10 |
| 10T | General Premises Safety | 19 | Not ranked | 15 |
| 10T | Political and Societal Pressures | | New in 2024 | |
| 10T | Title IX | 9 | 10 | 8 |

T- ranking tie

Emerging Risks

Respondents identified emerging risks in past surveys. This year, survey participants ranked some of the most frequently cited emerging risks in order of significance to their institution.

Political risks — **Adversarial Regulation** and **Political Climate and Instability** — scored highest among the emerging risks. The survey was open before and after the Nov. 5, 2024, elections. The election did not appear to influence how respondents view these two emerging risks.

Respondents ranked **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** differently than other emerging risks. **AI's** rankings clustered at the high and low ends of the scale, while other emerging risks clustered around a single ranking. This may reflect a difference in perspective. Many respondents may consider it a major emerging risk, while many others see it as another technological tool.

While institutions ranked most emerging risks similarly regardless of institution type, two trends arose:

- **Athletics** scored highest for NAIA institutions, followed closely by NCAA Division I institutions. Institutions with NCAA Division II and III athletics scored in the middle, and NJCAA colleges and institutions with no athletic programs mostly declined to identify **Athletics** as an emerging risk.
- Research universities — institutions with a High or Very High Research Activity Carnegie Classification — scored **Academic Readiness** much lower than other four-year institutions, 2.3 to 4.0. Research universities' selective admission standards may insulate them from declining college readiness among high school graduates.

Risk Average Score*

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Adversarial Regulation | 4.6 |
| Political Climate and Instability | 4.3 |
| Employee Well-Being | 3.9 |
| AI | 3.7 |
| Academic Readiness | 3.5 |
| Athletics | 2.4 |
| Climate Change | 1.6 |

*Scores can range from 0 to 7, with a higher score indicating a more significant emerging risk. 0 indicates the topic isn't perceived as a risk.

Tactics to Manage Emerging Risks

Respondents offered their tactics for managing their most significant emerging risk:

Adversarial Regulation

- Track local and state regulatory changes.
- Engage state and federal legislators.
- Increase employee compliance training.
- Hire additional compliance and legal counsel staff.
- Identify gaps in policies and update them as needed.

Political Climate and Instability

- Review expression and speech policies and practices.
- Expand extracurricular political programming.
- Train staff and student leaders on facilitating dialogue.
- Launch public relations campaigns to engage the surrounding community.
- Increase security in sensitive locations.
- Prepare for decreases in grant funding.

Employee Well-Being

- Conduct pay studies and implement their recommendations.
- Provide additional paid time off.
- Increase work location flexibility.
- Expand mental health support services.

Artificial Intelligence

- Convene academic and administrative AI committees.
- Hire a senior leader with AI expertise.
- Implement new academic AI policies and plagiarism detection tools.
- Create a process for vetting new AI tools.
- Train employees on data security.

Academic Readiness

- Hire more academic advisors and tutors.
- Revise the first-year curriculum.
- Launch pre-matriculation programs for underprepared students.
- Expand the behavioral intervention team.

Athletics

- Convene an athletics strategy committee.
- Reimagine the athletics financial model.
- Hire more athletics administrative staff.
- Change athletic conferences or divisions.

Climate Change

- Practice tabletop exercises for weather emergencies.
- Modernize emergency communication systems.
- Establish green building standards.
- Remove vegetation near buildings.
- Install fire-resistant building materials.



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To learn more, please visit www.ue.org.

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