

The Great Migration Remaking Higher Ed

America's Student Population Is on the Move



THE FREEMAN

SEP 17, 2026



6



1

Sh



Allen Mendenhall

Americans have long expressed their political preferences at the ballot box and their economic preferences with moving vans. Increasingly, they are expressing a third preference—where their children attend college—and the destination looks remarkably like the other two.

In 2025, North Carolina [gained](#) more than 84,000 residents from other states, more than any state in the union. Texas [added](#) over 67,000. California [lost](#) more than 229,000 and New York [lost](#) nearly 138,000, continuing a migration that has by now acquired the character of a rout rather than a trend. Yet few have noticed that the same state drawing families and factories are drawing something else: students, and with them the institutions built to educate them.

For most of the 20th century, the hierarchy of American public higher education was as fixed as the Electoral College map of a one-party era. Berkeley, Michigan,

Wisconsin—these were the names invoked when a public university wished to be mentioned in the same breath as Harvard. They remain formidable.

But formidable is no longer synonymous with singular.

Consider what the Southeastern Conference, or SEC—an organization whose reputation was built on forward passes rather than research grants—has quietly assembled. Texas A&M enrolls more than 79,000 students, a figure that would have seemed a typographical error a generation ago (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The University of Florida enrolls roughly 56,000 (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Collectively, SEC institutions now educate more than half a million students, with total enrollment around 620,000 (see [here](#) and [here](#)), a statistic that ought to interest university presidents in blue states rather more than it apparently does.

This is not the result of some coordinated Southern strategy hatched in a statehouse. Universities are lagging indicators of demography, not leading ones. States that attract families acquire, in due course, college students. States that generate jobs retain the graduates rather than exporting them, as Rust Belt states have exported so much else.

States that welcome capital acquire, eventually, the tax base with which to build ambitious public institutions. Ambition, it turns out, is portable. The family that leaves Illinois for Tennessee brings its expectations for its children along with the furniture, and both eventually find a permanent address in Knoxville or some other city in the Volunteer State.

Affordability, too, plays its part, and Americans have noticed that a nationally respectable degree from a Southern flagship costs a fraction of what state flagships elsewhere demand for a comparable credential, at a moment when the public's confidence in the value of a degree generally has become, to put it charitably, [provisional](#).

Governance deserves a mention, if only because its defenders and detractors agree on so little else. Several Southern legislatures have pushed their universities toward workforce preparation and measurable outcomes with an insistence that might strike some as philistine and others as overdue. For example, my home state of Alabama enacted the [CHEER Act](#) in the latest legislative session, a measure that ties funding performance goals related to graduation rates, student retention, state workforce needs, and more. Whatever the merit of any particular reform, the admissions applications keep arriving, which is more than can be said for enrollment at California State University, whose 6.5% [decline](#) from 2020 to 2023 was not disguised by the customary bureaucratic euphemism.

The difficulty is not the quality of instruction, but the demographic and fiscal headwinds facing the state that houses them.

None of this augurs the decline of the older powerhouses, whose endowments and Nobel laureates will outlast most currently fashionable predictions about them, including this one.

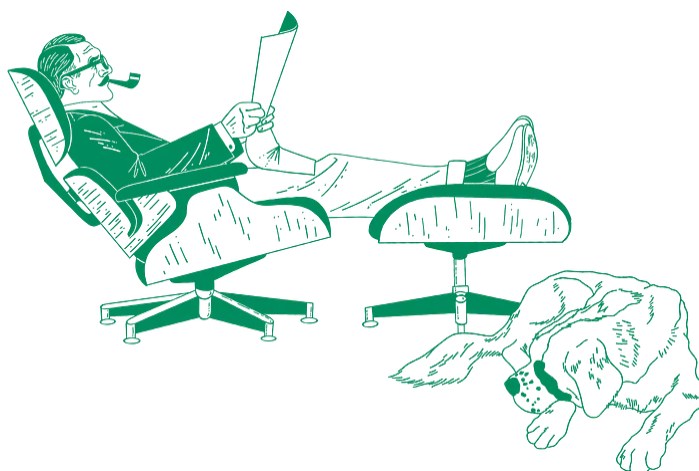
But it does suggest that the map of American higher education, like the map of American manufacturing before it, is being redrawn by people voting with moving vans, and that the redrawing has a distinctly Southern accent.

For a century, a state's political and economic fortunes could diverge sharply from its educational prestige; a place could hemorrhage jobs and population while its flagship university coasted on inherited reputation. That divergence is becoming difficult to sustain.

SEC schools still have work to do. Many may still discriminate on the basis of race through DEI programming, but on the whole, they are better on this score than the blue state counterparts.

The states gaining population are, increasingly, the states gaining research funding ambitious students, and—however much football commentary obscures the point—genuine academic momentum. Commentators who have spent a decade chronicling the relocation of corporate headquarters to the Sun Belt would do well to spend rather less time on scoreboards and rather more on admissions statistics.

That's the same story, only in a different helmet.



Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a PhD in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com.

Subscribe to The Freeman

Launched a year ago

Markets, liberty, culture. We are anti-anti-anti-Communist.

Upgrade to paid