

The new chancellor for the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education has a tough job ahead with lawmakers. Allison Garrett comes into the position from a background as an executive with Walmart for about a decade before entering higher education administration at smaller universities — Emporia State University in Kansas, Abilene Christian University in Texas and Oklahoma Christian University. Having political acumen in this role is just as important as business or academia experience. Lawmakers cut the budget to Oklahoma's public higher education system between 2008 and 2019 to rank as No. 3 in the nation for reductions in state-supported colleges and universities. Only Arizona and Louisiana slashed more, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The Legislature reduced higher education funding by 35.3% during that time. It remains at a level lower than in 2001. Oklahoma ranks among the bottom 10% in state-funded colleges, according to a Hechinger Institute report last year. Unlike public elementary and secondary education that also experienced destructive budget cuts, higher education passes the cost to students, and by extension their families. Legislators have a tendency to slash higher education budgets, then blame the universities for why their constituents can't afford college. The anti-higher education leanings are shown in complaints about too many degrees in areas they don't like or understand, like art, European studies or philosophy. Too many think only engineering, business, agriculture, law and medical fields are worthy of further study. Or, they start bashing what they think is going on in college classrooms, like critical race theory, without actually going into one. In the 1980s, Oklahoma paid about 40% of the budgets for its two flagship universities, the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. Now, it's at less than 10%. In 1985, OU and OSU ranked as one of the 10 lowest in tuition and fees in the nation, at about \$19.30 per credit hour and \$22.60 per credit hour for upper-division courses. That year, OU students paid an average of \$858 a semester for 15 credit hours of undergraduate tuition and fees. It was \$828 at OSU. Today, in-state OU students pay about \$6,605.75 per semester in tuition and fees, and OSU

averages to about \$6,960 per semester, according to their websites. That's about a 700% increase. Those do not include housing, books or meal plans, which make up the bigger portion of a student's cost. Out-of-state rates run between \$14,500 and \$15,000 per semester. That may explain why universities are emphasizing out-of-state recruiting. They cannot afford to stay in business with only in-state students. In an era that strives for diversity, equity and inclusion, these costs discourage students to attend Oklahoma's institutions of higher education. College debt has become one of the most pressing national problems, with an average federal loan borrower taking out \$36,510. Private student loan debt averages to \$54,921 per borrower. In Oklahoma, the average college debt is \$31,832 per borrower. In total, \$15.2 billion is owed by Oklahoma residents for higher education. It is keeping students from going to college. A 10-year look at enrollment found a 23.5% decrease across public and private colleges and universities, according to a report from the state regents. Public institutions fell 21.5% and private enrollment decreased 43.1% Not all students want or can find a career through higher education; some opt for Career Tech programs that are just as lucrative. But the tech schools have waiting lists for many programs and could not absorb the tens of thousands of college students. Our state and counties adequately fund the tech system to keep affordability possible. The same cannot be said of higher education. A push to consolidate the administrations of smaller regional colleges and universities by offering incentives never took off. Many Oklahoma cities depend on their local colleges as an employer. Administrators rarely cede power. Then, there is the Legislature. After former OU President David Boren led a failed statewide initiative petition to boost school funding (elementary through higher education) by raising the state's sales tax, lawmakers retaliated. The fiscal year 2016 higher education budget was cut by 11.4% and chipped away further for another two years. It hasn't reached above the 2001 level since. The state regents went into the last session asking for an \$88 million increase and got \$42 million of the request. That's the highest it's been since 2016 but still

lower than a decade ago. The outgoing chancellor, Glen Johnson, served for 14 years.

Previously, he was elected to the Oklahoma House and became House speaker before moving into academia as president of Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant. Johnson understood the nuance of partisanship and role politics plays in higher education funding. He can draw the lines between the rate of college-educated students to a prosperous economy. Oklahoma needs an educated workforce. Many industries requiring college degrees are facing worker shortages. Lawmakers must understand the value of investing in college degrees for Oklahoma students. Too many dismiss higher education as elitist. These are the challenges facing Garrett, and she has her work cut out for her. Featured video: [Subscribe to Daily Headlines Sign up!](#) \*

I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy. [Catch the latest in Opinion Get opinion pieces, letters and editorials sent directly to your inbox weekly! Sign up!](#) \* I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.