

Regents Of University Of Michigan

The Constitutional Stewards of One of America's Great Public Universities

When we think about the **University of Michigan**, images of the iconic Diag, the Michigan Stadium "Big House," or the prestigious Ross School of Business often come to mind. Yet behind the academic prestige, the athletic glory, and the sprawling Ann Arbor campus lies a small but immensely powerful governing body: the **Regents of the University of Michigan**. This eight-member board serves as the constitutional guardian of the university, holding authority that in many ways surpasses that of the state legislature when it comes to university affairs. Understanding who these individuals are, how they are selected, and what they do is essential for anyone interested in the governance of public higher education. This article provides a comprehensive look at the Board of Regents, its history, its powers, and its profound influence on one of the world's leading research institutions.

Foundation: A Unique Place in Michigan Law

To grasp the authority of the **Regents of the University of Michigan**, one must first understand their unique constitutional status. Unlike many public universities where the board is created by statute, the University of Michigan's Board of Regents is enshrined in the Michigan Constitution of 1963 (and earlier constitutions dating back to 1850). This constitutional autonomy grants the board considerable independence from the state's executive and legislative branches. The regents are empowered to "have the general supervision of the university" and "the exclusive control of the expenditure of university funds."

This means that the governor cannot unilaterally appoint or remove regents, and the state legislature cannot micromanage the university's daily operations or dictate how its funds are spent. The board serves as a buffer, protecting academic freedom and institutional integrity from political

interference. This constitutional protection is a cornerstone of the university's ability to maintain its high academic standards and research output.

Composition and Election of the Board

The board consists of eight members who are elected by the voters of the state of Michigan. This is a distinctive feature—most major public university boards are appointed by governors. The **University of Michigan Board of Regents** is one of the few in the nation where the general public directly elects the governing body. Regents are elected in statewide elections during the November general elections, coinciding with gubernatorial and presidential election years. Two regents are elected every two years for staggered eight-year terms. This staggered system ensures continuity; the board never experiences a complete turnover, which helps maintain institutional memory and stability.

The requirement for being a regent is relatively simple: a candidate must be a qualified elector of the state of Michigan. There is no requirement for academic background, higher education experience, or any specific professional qualification. This open-door policy means the board can include lawyers, business

executives, physicians, educators, and community activists. While this diversity of perspective is valuable, it also means the board can become highly politicized, as candidates often run on party tickets.

Terms and Vacancies

Each regent serves an eight-year term. If a vacancy occurs mid-term, the governor appoints a replacement to serve until the next general election, at which point a special election is held to fill the remainder of the term. The president of the university serves as a non-voting ex-officio member of the board, providing administrative expertise and continuity, but the ultimate authority rests with the eight elected regents.

Powers and Responsibilities: More Than Just a Figurehead Role

The **Regents of the University of Michigan** hold sweeping powers over the university's operations. While they are not involved in the day-to-day academic decisions—such as grading or curriculum design—they set the broad policies that shape the institution's direction. Their core responsibilities include:

- **Approving the University Budget:** The regents have the final say on the university's massive annual

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budget, which exceeds \$10 billion. They allocate resources across campuses in Ann Arbor, Dearborn, and Flint, as well as to Michigan Medicine.

- **Appointing the University President:** One of the most critical duties is the selection, evaluation, and, if necessary, dismissal of the university president. The regents conduct national searches for new presidents and set the terms of their employment.
- **Setting Tuition and Fees:** The board votes on tuition increases and mandatory fees for students. These decisions are often the most visible and controversial, directly impacting the affordability of higher education for Michigan families.
- **Overseeing Major Capital Projects:** Any major construction, from new dormitories to research labs to athletic facility upgrades, requires regental approval. The board reviews feasibility studies, financing plans, and design concepts.
- **Establishing Academic Policies:** While the faculty senate handles curriculum, the regents approve the establishment or dissolution of schools, colleges, and major academic programs.
- **Setting Employment and Labor Policies:** The board approves collective bargaining agreements with faculty unions and staff

unions, as well as broad policies regarding tenure, promotion, and employee benefits.

- **Ensuring Compliance and Risk Management:** The regents oversee the university's legal and ethical compliance, including Title IX enforcement, research integrity, and financial auditing.

Historical Highlights: Notable Decisions and Transformational Moments

Since its inception, the **Board of Regents of the University of Michigan** has been at the center of many landmark decisions that have shaped not only the university but also national conversations about higher education.

The Admission of Women (1870)

One of the board's earliest progressive decisions was the admission of women to the university in 1870, despite significant societal opposition. This was a bold move that positioned Michigan as a leader in coeducation. The regents, acting on their constitutional authority, simply decided to open the doors, and the university became one of the first major public universities in the country

to admit women on an equal basis with men.

The Desegregation of Housing (1938)

In the 1930s, the university maintained segregated housing for Black students. Under pressure from activists and a changing social landscape, the regents voted to desegregate the dormitories in 1938, becoming one of the first major northern universities to take such a step. While racism persisted on campus for decades, this early policy change was a significant milestone.

The Gratz and Grutter Cases (2003)

In the early 2000s, the University of Michigan's affirmative action policies were challenged in two landmark Supreme Court cases: *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*. The regents defended the university's holistic admissions process vigorously. While the court struck down the undergraduate point-based system (*Gratz*), it upheld the law school's individualized review process (*Grutter*), affirming that diversity is a compelling state interest. The regents' steadfast support of affirmative action shaped diversity policy for decades.

The COVID-19 Response (2020)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the regents made critical decisions about remote learning,

campus housing refunds, and health protocols. They also navigated contentious debates about vaccine and mask mandates, balancing public health concerns with individual rights. The board's decisions during this crisis had a direct impact on the health and education of tens of thousands of students.

Current Board Members and Their Profiles (as of 2025)

The board typically consists of a mix of Democrats and Republicans, reflecting the partisan nature of the election process. The current board includes:

- **Sarah Hubbard (R)** – A business executive and former state official with deep ties to Michigan politics and economic development. She was first elected in 2020 and is known for her focus on fiscal responsibility.
- **Denise Ilitch (D)** – A businesswoman, attorney, and former regent (she served previously and was re-elected). She is a strong advocate for student mental health resources and academic excellence.
- **Jordan Acker (D)** – An attorney and regent since 2015. He is known for his work on governance reform, athletics administration, and student affordability.

The Election

He has been a vocal advocate for transparency in regental decisions.

- **Paul Brown (R)** - A physician and former state representative. He brings a medical perspective to the board, particularly valuable for Michigan Medicine oversight.
- **Mark Bernstein (D)** - An attorney and regent first elected in 2015. He has championed sustainability, social justice initiatives, and expanding access for underserved communities.
- **Ron Weiser (R)** - A prominent real estate developer and longtime Republican donor. He previously served as U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia. His focus has been on fiscal stewardship and university competitiveness.
- **Michael J. Behm (D)** - An educator and former high school principal. He represents the K-12 perspective and advocates for teacher preparation programs.
- **John G. S. McDonald (D)** - The newest member, elected in 2024. He has a background in finance and higher education policy.

The board elects a chair and a vice-chair from among its members to lead meetings and set agendas. The chair serves a two-year term.

Process and Political Dynamics

Because the **Regents of the University of Michigan** are elected in partisan elections, the board often reflects the political composition of the state. In recent years, the balance of power has shifted between Democrats and Republicans, leading to more contentious meetings. Candidates are often selected by political parties and run on platforms that include tuition control, free speech policies, diversity initiatives, and university independence.

Critics argue that partisan elections create a politicized board that may prioritize party loyalty over sound governance. Proponents argue that elections ensure accountability to the people of Michigan. Regardless of perspective, the partisan nature of the board means that regent meetings can sometimes become venues for political debate, particularly on hot-button issues like campus protests, DEI programs, and athletic conference realignment. The regents must balance their political identities with their fiduciary duty to act in the best interest of the university as a whole.

How the Regents Affect Students and

Faculty

To many students and faculty, the **University of Michigan Board of Regents** may seem like a distant entity that only appears in the news during tuition votes or presidential searches. However, the board's decisions have a direct, tangible impact on campus life:

- **Tuition Affordability:** Each year, the regents vote on tuition rates. Their decisions determine whether students face a 2% increase or a 7% increase, directly affecting student debt levels.
- **Housing and Facilities:** When the board approves a new residence hall or a renovation of the Michigan Union, it directly improves the quality of student life.
- **Academic Programs:** The board's approval of new schools (like the School of Information in the 1990s) or new degree programs shapes the educational opportunities available.
- **Research Funding:** By approving budgets that prioritize research infrastructure, the regents enable faculty to attract

grants and conduct cutting-edge work.

- **Campus Climate:** The board's policies on free expression, diversity, and conduct set the tone for the campus environment. Recent debates over protest policies and hate speech regulations have been directly overseen by the regents.

Transparency and Public Participation

Regent meetings are open to the public, and public comment periods allow students, faculty, staff, and community members to voice their concerns. This transparency is a hallmark of the board's operation, although some critics argue that the meetings are too formal and that the public has limited actual influence on decisions. The board also publishes agendas and minutes online, allowing anyone to track their actions and votes.

Challenges Facing the Board Today

The **Regents of the University of Michigan** currently face several significant challenges: