

Sunshine Week Calls Attention to Darkening Skies Over Pa. Universities

By Amy Kristin Sanders

University employees engaged in [sexual misconduct](#). Administrators misappropriating [public funds](#). Scientists paid by industry groups to obtain [desirable research outcomes](#).

Open records laws have helped journalists and watchdog groups uncover wrongdoing at universities around the country. Yet [Pennsylvania](#) largely exempts four of our state universities—Penn State, Pitt, Temple and Lincoln— from complying with the state’s Right To Know law.

Shockingly, five years after the U.S. Office for Civil Rights [found](#) that Penn State—still reeling from the Sandusky sexual misconduct scandal—failed to protect students who filed sexual harassment complaints, the university retains its “state-related” designation.

Pennsylvania’s four state-related universities that are exempt from the Right to Know law receive “hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars” each year, according to a [Spotlight PA report](#). But tracking where that money goes, and how it is spent, is nearly impossible.

Some state officials have long argued against the exemption. In 2012, Gov. Tom Corbett, Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi and Auditor General Jack Wagner all voiced support for more transparency.

“Penn State lobbied—the previous president Spanier lobbied—extensively four or five years ago to have Penn State University excluded from the ‘right to know’ legislation,” Wagner told [WHYY](#). “We think that was wrong and we believe it should change.”

More recently, in November 2024, state lawmakers passed [a bill](#) requiring the universities to disclose more detailed financial records for specific departments, high-dollar contracts and each institution’s 200 highest-paid employees.

Rather than merely chipping away at the secrecy surrounding these four universities, the General Assembly should repeal the state-related status exception and clearly articulate its intention for all public universities to fully comply with the state’s Sunshine Laws.

Nearly one-third of Americans report they have little to no trust in higher education, according to a [2024 Gallup poll](#)— a marked increase from 10 percent in 2015.

Penn State President Neeli Bendapudi’s recent [announcement](#) that regarding the closure of Commonwealth Campuses has been shrouded in secrecy, increasing distrust among faculty, students and staff who have [publicly expressed their concerns](#).

Even more, a member of the university’s own Board of Trustees is [suing](#) Penn State, alleging it has failed to comply with the state’s Sunshine Laws.

“To be clear, I am making no allegations of malfeasance or gross negligence,” Trustee Barry Fenchak [wrote](#). “But activities like those would be impossible to uncover without access to the information requested.”

[Diligent reporting](#) by University of Florida journalism students, using the state’s Sunshine Laws, revealed that former university president Ben Sasse had “channeled millions to GOP allies, secretive contracts.”

But that kind of reporting rarely happens in Pennsylvania, and journalists who do attempt investigative reporting often have to resort to [lawsuits](#) to force the state-related universities to release their records.

The high level of secrecy also fuels the largely Republican-led efforts to diminish academic freedom and influence curriculum by limiting the amount of publicly available information.

In 2024, State Rep. Stephanie Scialabba introduced [HB 2041](#), which would have barred colleges from mandating that students take “diversity courses” as part of their degree requirements

One way to begin to restore public trust—and to combat conservative concerns over indoctrination—is for universities to comply with the state’s Sunshine Laws.

[Sunshine Week](#) serves as a stark reminder that the fight for government transparency, a core tenant of a democratic society, is never over.

Whether you are the parent of a college student or just a Pennsylvania taxpayer, it is your right to know how public funding is spent.

[Let your lawmakers](#) know that you think all of Pennsylvania’s public universities should be held accountable under the state’s Sunshine Laws.

Amy Kristin Sanders is the John and Ann Curley Chair in First Amendment at Penn State as well as a licensed attorney and former journalist.