UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS SYSTEM

Office of the President

October 12, 2026

Open Letter from University of Arkansas System President Jay B. Silveria:

The University of Arkansas System traces its origins to the establishment of Arkansas Industrial University in 1871, now the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, under the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862. Coupled with the founding of the state's 1890 Land-Grant university, today named the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, the UA System is rooted in the public university tradition of expanding access to academic, practical and professional opportunities to the citizens of the state. Today, the UA System includes 22 campuses, divisions, and units – universities, community colleges, an academic medical center, professional schools, and units dedicated to advancing research, extension, and public service – with a stated mission of strengthening Arkansas's economy, health, and culture.

The leaders of the UA System are firmly committed to the tradition of public higher education and its role to provide economic advancement for Arkansans and the communities we serve. We demonstrated this commitment in the fall of 2025 with the adoption of our revised mission statement and Strategic Pillars, including 1) expanding educational access; 2) promoting student success; 3) advancing scholarship, innovation, and discovery; 4) stewarding our resources and the public trust; 5) responding to statewide needs; and 6) collaborating through technology and business innovation. We believe the statement of our mission and pillars, along with other policies and actions discussed below, directly address the issues raised in the open letter written by U.S. Education Secretary Linda E. McMahon earlier this year. As the statewide leader for public higher education in Arkansas, the UA System has taken the following steps:

1. *Admissions* – The vast majority of UA System institutions and programs are open-access, providing opportunities to all who wish to pursue a post-secondary credential. While the system's land-grant tradition promotes a culture of access, there are certain schools and programs that require higher academic achievement. In these programs, the system has committed to conform to the legal and academic standards as interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* decision. Since the decision, the system has taken proactive steps through its Office of General Counsel to ensure our institutions follow Title VI as interpreted by the Court, including through amending certain scholarship standards and educating admissions office to adopt practices that strictly follow the decision.

2. *Free Speech* – The UA System has demonstrated its commitment to free speech in both policy and action. Board Policy 705.1 and UA System Policy 715.1 address expressive activities on the campuses, divisions, and units of the UA System, including explicit statements of the university's support of freedom to teach, learn, discuss and expose ideas to critical analysis. The Office of General Counsel has also developed model policies for campuses. The university's policies are consistent with the First Amendment and with

state law, including Act 184 of 2019 (the FORUM Act), which concerns expressive activities on campus, including ensuring public areas of campus are designated public forums for members of the campus community and prohibiting institutions from denying benefits and privileges to student organizations based on beliefs or expressive activities. While the UA System promotes robust debate and free speech and allows for spontaneous assemblies, distribution of literature and other expressive activities, state law and university policy prohibit expressive activities that disrupt the learning environment.

3. *Intellectual Pluralism* – As stated above, freedom to teach, learn and expose ideas to critical analysis are core values of the UA System. The UA System promotes intellectual pluralism by protecting academic freedom and establishing faculty appointment, promotion, tenure, and evaluation processes based on professional qualifications, teaching, research, service, and merit, rather than any viewpoint or ideology. System policy expressly protects faculty members' freedom to conduct research, publish findings, discuss subjects in the classroom that are germane to the course, and express opinions as citizens, including opinions that may be controversial. Tenure and due-process protections further ensure that faculty cannot be dismissed or disciplined simply for expressing a particular viewpoint, creating an academic environment where a diversity of perspectives can be represented and debated openly.

4. *Access and Affordability* – The first two pillars of the UA System include promoting student access to higher education and success in completing a credential. Affordability is at the core of both pillars. As a public university system with both 4-year universities and 2-year colleges, the UA System offers an array of programs, including undergraduate, graduate and professional, as well as certificate and non-credit programs with direct workforce pathways. Affordability for entry into these programs is ensured both by the Board of Trustees through reasonable tuition rates, and by the state through a myriad of aid programs. With need-based aid programs at both the state and federal levels, students can fully cover the cost of a 2-year degree program in the UA System. At the 4-year level, in-state tuition and fee rates remain among the lowest in the country, and inflation-adjusted tuition and fees has steadily declined in recent years.

5. *Academic Standards* – Academic rigor and integrity are core tenants of a healthy university system. In the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the UA System, like all institutions, is balancing the potential benefits and the ethical, legal and operational risks associated with the rapidly evolving technology. In April, the UA System implemented a policy covering responsible use of AI, directing each campus, division and unit to establish AI oversight committees and adopt campus-level policies on AI. The system policy defines acceptable uses of AI in the teaching and learning environment and charges university faculty with clearly communicating expectations regarding AI use in course syllabi. The policy further addresses AI use in scholarship, research, and creative activity, ensuring such use complies with ethical research standards, funding and publication requirements, and institutional review board (IRB) protocols.

6. *Foreign Influence* – The UA System was involved in the passage of Act 473 of 2025, The Research and Protection Act, which establishes safeguards to prevent malign foreign influence from affecting Arkansas's public universities and their research enterprise. The Act increases transparency and oversight of significant foreign gifts and contracts, restricts certain cultural and academic partnerships with foreign adversaries, requires enhanced screening of certain foreign nationals seeking research positions, and establishes travel approval and monitoring requirements for institutions with significant federal research activity. Together with UA Board Policy 220.1, which implements components of the Act within the UA System, these measures are designed to protect university research, intellectual property, academic programs, and institutional decision-making from foreign government influence and other national security risks.

7. *Advancing National Prosperity* – The fifth pillar of the UA System is "Responsiveness to Statewide Needs and Priorities." This commitment extends to promoting national prosperity by serving as a responsive, solutions-oriented partner to the State of Arkansas. Through its statewide presence, the UA System works closely with policymakers, business and industry leaders, and communities to identify and respond to Arkansas's evolving workforce, healthcare, and economic development needs. By aligning its educational, research, and workforce-training efforts with state priorities and directives, the System helps ensure Arkansas has the talent, expertise, and innovation necessary to grow and prosper. A successful Arkansas promotes a successful region and country.

The UA System welcomes the opportunity to reaffirm these commitments and to demonstrate that public higher education can remain both academically excellent and accountable to the people and communities we serve. We believe that strong universities and colleges are essential to the prosperity and security of our state and nation, and that public confidence is earned through openness, intellectual freedom, academic rigor, responsible stewardship, and a clear commitment to our public mission.

As the state's public university system, we will continue to work with the Governor, the General Assembly, our federal partners, and other stakeholders to ensure our institutions are responsive to the needs and priorities of Arkansas while maintaining the independence necessary for a healthy university environment. We appreciate Secretary McMahon's leadership and her invitation to engage in this important national conversation and look forward to continuing our work to strengthen public higher education and the opportunities it provides for the people of Arkansas.

Sincerely,

Jay B. Silveria
President
Charles E. Scharlau Presidential Leadership Chair