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The University of Maryland System comprises eleven campuses and four major research and service components.

The System's earliest unit was founded in Baltimore in 1807 as the College of Medicine of Maryland (Chapter 53, Acts of 1807). In 1812, it enlarged its professional curricula and changed its name to the University of Maryland (Chapter 159, Acts of 1812).

In 1856, the Maryland State College of Agriculture was founded, and in 1920 it merged with the Baltimore professional schools to form the University of Maryland with campuses at Baltimore (UMAB) and College Park (UMCP) (Chapter 480, Acts of 1920). The Baltimore County (UMBC) campus was established in 1966. In 1970, the University of Maryland was organized into a five-campus system, restructuring two divisions—the Maryland State College in Princess Anne (founded 1886) and the College of Special and Continuation Studies (founded 1947)—as the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) and University of Maryland University College (UMUC), respectively.

The University of Maryland achieved land-grant status in 1865 (UMCP) and 1890 (UMES) and was designated a national sea grant college in 1982.

As the components of the University of Maryland were evolving so too were the State's teacher's colleges. The earliest of these was privately founded in 1865 in Baltimore to train Negro teachers. It would later become a State institution, move to Bowie and assume the name Bowie State University. In 1866, the first public teachers' college was created as the Maryland State Normal School, now Towson State University. State Normal School No. 2, now Frostburg State University, followed in 1898. In 1900, the Baltimore City School Board laid the foundation for what would later become Coppin State College. The first normal school on the Eastern Shore opened in 1925 and now bears the name Salisbury State University. In 1963, the five former teachers' colleges were brought together under the direction of a single governing body, the Board of Trustees of the State Universities and Colleges. In 1975, the University of Baltimore, privately founded fifty years earlier, joined the campuses governed by the Board.

The University of Maryland System was created in 1988 through the merger of campuses and components formerly under the Board of Trustees of the State Universities and Colleges and the University of Maryland (Chapter 246, Acts of 1988). The System is governed by the seventeen-member Board of Regents. With Senate advice and consent, the Governor appoints sixteen of the Board's members. Fifteen serve five-year terms and one, a student member, is appointed for a one-year term. The Secretary of Agriculture serves as an ex officio voting member (Code Education Article, sec. 12-102).