The University of Alabama System was created by statute in 1920 and opened its doors on April 18, 1931, as the University of the State of Alabama. The University was elevated to constitutional status in the Constitution of Alabama in 1969. Its statutory corporate existence, under the name "The Board of Trustees of The University of Alabama," appears in the 1975 Ala. Code §§ 16-47-1 to 16-47-204, and its constitutional status is recognized in the Alabama Constitution, article XIV, § 261 as amended and Amendment 230. Until 1990, the University, with branch campuses and extension centers around the State, was headed by a single president on the Tuscaloosa campus. In 1990, The Board of Trustees established separate campuses in Birmingham and Huntsville whose presidents, along with the president of the Tuscaloosa campus, report directly to the Board. In 1994, The Board of Trustees appointed a University of Alabama System staff and in 1970 appointed a Chancellor as chief executive officer of the System.

The University of Alabama System consists of The University of Alabama, The University of Alabama at Birmingham, and The University of Alabama at Huntsville, and is governed by The Board of Trustees of The University of Alabama. The Constitution of the State of Alabama states that the Board is composed of three members from the Congressional districts in which the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa) is located and two members from each of the six remaining districts. The Governor of the State and the Superintendent of Education are ex-officio members. Those members who are not ex-officio are elected by the Board, subject to confirmation by the State Senate. If the Senate rejects a name of any person submitted to it by the Board, then the Senate elects a person in place of the one rejected. Trustees may serve up to three consecutive, full six-year terms, except for ex-officio members.

The purpose of the Board is to ensure the effective leadership, management, and control of the activities of the institutions within the System in order to provide for a distinctive, orderly form of governance, and to secure and continue responsive, progressive, and superior institutions of higher education. The primary functions of the Board are to determine the major policies of the System to include the review of existing policy; to define the mission, role, and scope of each campus; and to oversee ultimate accountability to the public and political bodies of Alabama; these policies and procedures are promulgated to ensure that, through the UAS Office, the necessary flow of information for such accountability takes place.