

Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education lays off educators, closes schools

Douglas Lyons, Samuel Davidson
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The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), comprising 14 state-owned schools, is now engaged in what officials are dubbing a “system-wide redesign” plan and “retrenchment” process to increase student-faculty ratios. The restructuring plan involves laying off faculty members, increasing class sizes, shutting down a number of state system schools and purging academic programs.

The school administration is claiming that the changes are being made with the aim of reducing tuition costs for students, but no tuition decreases have been promised or announced.

As with hundreds of other colleges and universities around the country, at PASSHE the pandemic has prompted massive revenue shortfalls, compelling school officials to lay off faculty and staff and reduce educational opportunities for students.

According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, when the pandemic hit last spring PASSHE officials estimated revenue loss of \$52 million, resulting from a decline in enrollment and refunds for students who refused to attend schools that unsafely reopened. PASSHE officials issued a statement in April saying all 14 schools would have to immediately cut expenses, excluding the other state-funded universities of Penn State and Temple. The losses, it was assumed, would be offset by \$39 million in federal refunds. However, the latest projections estimate an even larger deficit than initially expected.

As for the promised tuition decrease, Republican State Representative Brad Roae, from Crawford County, stated in early December that it is too early to ascertain cost reduction in tuition: “In my opinion, it is too early to predict any specific possible decrease since some of the savings could be used to expand educational opportunities for high demand careers.”

In July, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed with overwhelming bipartisan support Act 50, which was signed into law by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf. The act reduces costs by closing, or in their language “merging,”

some universities together and reducing faculty and academics: California with Clarion, Edinboro with Slippery Rock, and Lock Haven with Mansfield Universities. The process for these mergers will begin as early as 2022.

By October, more than 100 tenured and tenure-track faculty members received a letter of retrenchment per the union contract, alerting them that they will lose their jobs by the end of the 2020–21 academic year. The faculty members affected work at Mansfield, Lock Haven, Indiana, Edinboro and Cheyney Universities.

Retrenchment, found in union contracts, is the process by which university management has the prerogative to lay off faculty and restructure educational institutions to guarantee profitability. In some cases, those faculty members receiving the letters can be moved to other positions within the university system. However, for many faculty the layoffs will be permanent.

A jobs bloodbath is underway. More letters were sent to unsuspecting workers on December 15, right before the holiday season. On March 1, first-year faculty members will be notified if they will be terminated at the end of the term.

According to the *Times*’ article, Michele Papakie, chairperson of the journalism and public relations department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), had a Zoom call in mid-October with IUP’s dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, who said that six academic departments would be eliminated at the school, along with journalism merging with communications or being eliminated in its entirety. IUP would lay off 15 percent of its full-time faculty or 128 positions.

A faculty member at Shippensburg University told the WSWWS that tenured faculty have not faced any layoffs or received retrenchment letters as other state schools since they “have balanced the budget for this academic year by not renewing many contingent faculty contracts.” In other words, Shippensburg University is slashing the most exploited teachers, adjuncts, to pave the way for tenured faculty members in the coming years.

The professor, speaking under condition of anonymity,

added, “They taught classes as needed in many departments. They might be teaching an introductory survey course, or they might be teaching a specialty course in which the department didn’t have the expertise. Some departments were able to keep some, but other departments lost all of their contingent faculty members.”

The union, the Association of Pennsylvania State College & University Faculties (APSCUF), has worked hand in glove with school officials to reduce tenured staff, degrade academics and permit contingent faculty to be used as a section of cheap educators.

The Shippensburg professor who spoke to the WSWS noted, “From our union view, cuts to the contingent faculty are not considered retrenchment because they are considered to be hired contract to contract. So we did not have retrenchment at Shippensburg, according to our union. I think contingent faculty should have those contractual rights, many of them have similar degrees as we do. Most are teaching just semester to semester and not working full time. It is not right!”

He noted that school administration has started to slash jobs in other departments as well, stating, “The university also laid off many of our staff. Some were custodial and grounds keepers, a lot of support staff that keeps the infrastructure of the university running. They run the equipment and maintain the grounds.”

Even before the pandemic, the state system had been shifting the burden of costs onto the backs of students and staff, particularly since the Great Recession.

Pennsylvania—under both Republican and Democratic governorships—has reduced per pupil funding by 34 percent since 2008, with the balance made up in an increase in cost of tuition for students. Tuition increased more than the average rate of inflation, \$5,358 in 2008–09 compared to \$7,716 for the 2018–19 school year.

Compared to other states, Pennsylvania has been at the head of the pack in enacting deep and sweeping cuts, giving about \$220 million less annually to the state system than at the turn of this century. In fact, the state paid 75 percent of the students’ cost to attend state universities in the 1980s, whereas college seekers are now encumbered with 75 percent and forced to incur an enormous amount of debt through student loans.

The situation unfolding in higher education in Pennsylvania is emblematic of a much broader attack on education throughout the country. Robert Kelchen, a professor of education at Seton Hall in New Jersey, told the *Times*, “This is a story that’s going to be playing out in much of the country over much of the next decade.”

Across the nation, enrollment in higher education reached its peak in 2010 at 18.1 million, followed by a steady decline

resulting from the slow recovery and miserable job growth from the recession, falling to 16.6 million today.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania’s enrollment declined from around 15,600 in 2012 to roughly 10,600 at the start of the 2019–20 school year. Room-and-board costs rose from \$1,670 per semester to \$3,000–4,000 per semester. All in all, a student enrolling in this university is expected to fork over at least \$21,000 a year. Average student loan debt in Pennsylvania has risen by 35 percent between 2011 and 2018.

The Shippensburg professor who spoke to the WSWS commented, “I don’t know if there will be more cuts next year. The university funds are based on enrollment. Students are the revenue generator, not state appropriations. It means we are not really a public institution. If students are paying 75 percent of the funds, that is where the money is coming from. It is not coming from the state.”

For his party, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf has pushed for the reopening of public universities and schools as part of the drive to open businesses amid the worsening pandemic. California University of Pennsylvania, for example, has announced in-person learning will resume during the spring semester, despite the death of a student athlete, Jamain Stephens Jr., from a blood clot in his heart after he had contracted COVID-19. Classes will start on January 25 without interruption through spring break.

Pennsylvania recorded its highest daily total for COVID-19 infections on December 21, with almost 15,000 cases. Wolf enacted some minor restrictions over the holidays, but he has refused to close in-person learning at K-12 schools and universities. He has said his chief concern is to keep schools open.

To fight for their interests, educators and students should join the growing network of rank-and-file safety committees determined to save the lives of students, educators and parents. The fight for this is interlocked with the fight to expand free, high-quality education for all students. A member of the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Safety Committee said, “This is the case for free public higher ed. It should be publicly funded. Education is a right, not a privilege.” We urge all those who agree with this perspective to join the committee today at wsws.org/edsafety.



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