

Shippensburg faculty member demands action to save jobs and university education for working-class students

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The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), with the backing of both the Democrats and Republicans and the assistance of the unions, has embarked on a campaign to close state schools, lay off faculty members, and cut academic programs for students. Enrollment has declined over the past decade due to rising tuition and few opportunities for good paying and secure jobs for college graduates. This has caused many students to spurn the state system and find alternative ways to attain education and make ends meet without being burdened with mountains of tuition debt.

The state system comprises 14 state schools—some of which will be closed in the coming years—and an enrollment of roughly 95,800 as of 2019. Since the pandemic hit in the early spring of 2020, enrollment has declined and PASSHE has had to issue refunds for students and educators who refused to attend the unsafe schools.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a faculty member at the Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, about 41 miles from the state capital of Harrisburg, about the layoffs and cuts, which have been rapidly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“These system changes being pushed through by the Chancellor are the most destructive we have seen from any chancellor in my decade-plus in the system. The prior chancellors—John Cavanaugh [2008-13] and Frank Brogan [2013-17]—both pushed for on-line programs and a fundamental change to our system, and many faculty members believed they would push to consolidate universities. At least then, the union leaders pushed back against the chancellor.

“However, with this new Chancellor, Dr. Dan Greenstein, perhaps because he comes off as a hip, New Democrat, Microsoft tech guy, the union leadership welcomed him with open arms, ignored direct warnings about the Gates Foundation’s Higher Ed model that Greenstein developed over his prior six years, and even agreed to engage in ‘interest-based bargaining’ with a guy they knew nothing about. As a result of that he has been able to push changes that are much worse than the prior two chancellors and, as I see it, changes that have the potential to destroy the system and further limit access to quality higher education for working PA families.”

When Greenstein was sworn in by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf in January of 2019, he said, “I’m talking about [a]

fundamental transformation and redesign” of the state system, entailing closures and public-private partnerships. Greenstein had previously worked for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, using identity politics and online technology to provide more “equity” in schools—divvying out more academic and administration posts to minorities and women—rather than equality and greater access for lower-income students of all races.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for its part, is notorious for attacking public education at the K-12 and higher education levels. It has supported charter schools, siphoning public-education budgets to fund them, and has pushed for various “reform” measures such as a billion-dollar endeavor to increase teacher “effectiveness” and new curriculums. K-12 and higher education is not safe from the hands of such money-making capitalists.

As Greenstein took over as Chancellor of PASSHE, being praised by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf, he offered the same educational paradigm for which Bill Gates, one of the richest people in the world, had hired him: the reduction of faculty, closure of schools, and competitiveness based on cuts, all of which the union, the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF) have embraced, mounting no opposition to defend rank-and-file educators.

In 2016, faculty members at PASSHE launched a strike to defend their jobs and healthcare, as well as adjuncts and students, from proposed cuts, after working without a contract for over a year. It was the first strike in the system’s history. The action was quickly shut down, without APSCUF allowing the rank and file to see what was in the tentative contract for fear that it would be rejected, leading to a broader movement against the Democratic Party and its austerity measures.

“The union leadership, while talking a good game has done little or nothing to really push back against these initiatives,” the faculty member said. “They have proven over the years [such as the faculty strike in 2016] to be complicit, naïve, and/or feckless and weak. They accepted CBA [collective bargaining agreement] language changes in a TA [tentative agreement] that the former union president literally told us he did not know exactly what they meant. They have continually pushed back against any member action against retrenchments [the process by which university management can lay off tenured faculty by citing financial reasons] and now we have heard nothing about steps we can,

should or would be supported in taking concerning the Chancellor's so-called system transformation.

"The only way faculty, staff and the working families who depend on the state system of education are going to be able to push back is through direct action, rank-and-file committees and grassroots movements to push back."

The Socialist Equality Party has spearheaded the formation of rank-and-file safety committees for educators in Pennsylvania, Texas, California, New York, Michigan and other states to fight the homicidal return to unsafe schools, including the fight for a general strike to close schools, universities and nonessential workplaces, while guaranteeing full compensation to workers and small business owners.

According to the Shippensburg professor, the financial constraints and debt of PASSHE are being grossly exaggerated by Greenstein and university management to push through immediate and deep restructuring.

"The premise of the cuts and the need for system transformation are simply not true. Even a first cursory look at the financials of the system show that direct educational services are not the source of the increasing costs in the system. However, the accounting system is set up to lump admin costs into direct educational costs," he said.

One of the metrics used by Greenstein and his ilk is to predict student enrollment in PASSHE based on high school graduation rates. "The high school graduation projections from PDE [Pennsylvania Department of Education] also do not support the exigency that the chancellor suggests," he continued. "While there were a couple of years of bubbles in terms of grads that are always used as the baselines, the reality is that high school graduation rates are fairly steady moving forward, with one or two outlier down years."

On top of this, state cuts to PASSHE and university officials mismanaging funds to entice students to attend a particular school contributed to the drop in enrollment. "One of the things you will notice is that we have lost about 4-5 percentage points of students going on to higher education," the teacher said. "It is not a coincidence that this drop coincided with state cuts that led to increases in tuition and the building of luxury dorms that increased the cost of attendance dramatically. The debt service on these residence halls and other buildings that were far overpriced has played a role in tightening the financial pressure on our campuses, forcing students back to campus during a pandemic and drastically increasing student debt loads. In fact, in some cases, campuses are now requiring students to spend two years in the dorms so the universities can cover the costs of these buildings."

Though students deserve the best and affordable living situation, university officials constructed penthouse suites to attract students to attend their school, as opposed to another PASSHE school. The result has been a disaster for students, outrageous prices for room-and-board, and a requirement that students must pay for these luxurious rooms in order to have an education

In addition, top university officials are still raking in high salaries, as faculty have been let go and cheap adjuncts are used to fill the new vacancies at a much lower salary and without benefits.

"When you look across top admin in the system, as new

individuals have come in, their salaries have far exceeded their predecessors. This includes Dan Greenstein, but also the presidents on campuses and then their 'cabinet' positions and top-level admin across the board. Greenstein makes \$380,000."

A list of some of the university presidents' incomes are as follows: Kenneth Hawkinson, Kutztown, \$284,633; Daniel Wubah, Millersville, \$278,000; Laurie Carter, Shippensburg, \$278,000; Robert Pignatello, Lock Haven, \$232,000; Guiyou Huang, Edinboro, \$252,450; Bashar Hanna, Bloomsburg, \$278,000; Christopher Fiorentino, West Chester, \$310,459; Michael Driscoll, Indiana, \$390,235; Charles Patterson, Mansfield, \$242,540.

When compared to associate professors' income, which ranges, according to the public record, as low as \$63,000 into the \$90,000 range, university presidents are making 4-6 times more than the faculty who are the driving forces of schools.

PASSHE had been billed upon its creation as an affordable alternative for working-class and lower middle-class students to attend college, attracting faculty members who wanted to make a mark on their students and the broader community. "This is one of the reasons I and most faculty work here. We could have gone to private universities and made more. But we chose to stay here because of our belief in access for the working class and I would add middle class families to that today.

"The big point to me, is that every working-class and middle-class family with a child who is not yet collage age should be up in arms about this system transformation.

"The only way we can take action is by mobilizing ourselves. The union is not going to take action; they have already said so. We are going to have get the word out and build community support. We will get their support once they see what is going on."

The WSWS will provide a voice for all those willing to fight for free, high-quality education and against faculty cuts and the homicidal return to unsafe schools. All those interested should join the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the national network of rank-and-file safety committees.



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