

Pennsylvania moves forward with a vicious attack on the public university system as enrollment collapses

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As the spring semester is about to start for students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), the system administration's devastating restructuring plan, approved on July 14 of last year, has begun in full force. The plan entails the axing of staff, faculty and educational programs.

The so-called "consolidation" plan has merged six universities into two schools: California, Clarion and Edinboro, on the one hand, and Bloomsburg, Lock Haven and Mansfield, on the other.

In a study conducted by the Political Economy Research Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, more than 1,500 jobs will be eliminated by the restructuring, including 809 faculty and over 600 staff. The most recent job cuts have happened at Lock Haven and Mansfield universities, where 26 faculty positions are on the chopping block for the academic year of 2023-24.

Both big business parties with the support of the trade unions have for years pushed for this destructive plan, salivating at the prospects of dropping the state system from the state budget permanently. As early as January 2019, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf noted when swearing in Dr. Daniel Greenstein as Chancellor of PASSHE that he was "talking about fundamental transformation and redesign" of state systems, entailing closures and public-private partnerships.

PASSHE officials and the state government point to the system's financial situation as justification for the layoffs and mergers and say this will reduce costs for students. However, they paper over the fact that PASSHE and the state's policies have deliberately plunged the system into its financial mess and the plan will do nothing to alleviate the skyrocketing cost of

tuition and the debt students will carry after graduation.

At the start of last year's semester, Pennsylvania's 14 state-owned universities lost over 5,000 students, a drop in enrollment not seen in over three decades. The largest drops ranged from 12.19 percent (4,465 to 3,922) at Clarion to less than 1 percent (17,719 to 17,640) at West Chester. The system, founded in 1983, saw its enrollment peak at about 119,500 students in 2010 and has since fallen to 88,651.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ruling class's criminal profit-over-lives policy has prompted a mass exodus of students who are refusing to attend coronavirus-infested universities, accelerating a process that has been underway for over a decade. State officials are using the overall 5.4 percent downturn and the anticipated loss of \$36 million (4.5 percent) in tuition revenues to further entrench their "consolidation" plan proposed and approved by the Democratic government-appointed Greenstein.

With the rapid surge of the highly transmissible Omicron mutation, spring enrollment numbers will be down across the board for each PASSHE school. Despite the freeze in tuition fees for the past three years by the state system to retain as many students as possible, the pandemic's impact on family incomes has also compelled young people to postpone college education or seek cheaper forms of schooling.

According to Cody Jones, spokesperson for PASSHE: "We suspect that we are finally seeing the COVID-19 effect on enrollment that some expected to see last fall."

PASSHE'S financial situation is compounded by its low financial support from the state legislature. Pennsylvania ranks 47th among the 50 states in per

capita funding for state universities, including the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State.

Despite the rhetoric coming from Greenstein's office, the merging of schools has not expanded opportunities for students but drastically limited their educational choices and academic aspirations.

In October 2020, Greenstein told the state legislature that mergers could mean that mechatronics engineering technology, a degree program within engineering offered only at California University of Pennsylvania (Cal U), would become available to students at all three merged universities in the western portion of the state.

But in December 2021, Christine Kindl, spokeswoman for Cal U, said in the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, "the program will be taught only to those on Cal U's campus"—more than 100 miles from both Clarion and Edinboro, and went on to list more academic programs which will be inaccessible for new students in the fall 2022 semester. Last month, PASSHE officials slashed majors such as physics, philosophy and art history at some schools for the coming academic year.

A faculty member at Bloomsburg University, Ms. Lee, in a letter sent to the Provost and cited in the *Post-Gazette*, scathingly attacked PASSHE officials for going forward with this plan to reduce the quality of education. "What I have never seen—and never thought I would see," said Lee, "is an institution so hell-bent on its own short-term survival that it resorts to destroying its mission as a university." The teacher continued, "Yet over the course of many mercenary decisions executed in a fashion callous as well as disingenuous, [Bloomsburg University] has not only lost its way but sold its proverbial soul."

"The dissolution of the philosophy major—along with physics, anthropology, and whatever programs are selected for extinction next—is not, I think, a cause of Bloomsburg's death as a university, but rather the effect of the decision to value the generation of revenue over education," she concluded.

The Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF), the organization representing 5,000 workers at the state universities, has done nothing to stop the gutting of academic programs or elimination of faculty, who waged a courageous struggle in 2016 to defend the PASSHE system and their jobs.

Jamie Martin, the president of APSCUF, issued a trite, spineless statement on the most recent layoffs at Mansfield and Lock Haven universities. She reiterated that APSCUF will not lift one finger to stop the layoffs and then brazenly told faculty that the organization will work harder to move forward with the consolidation process.

"I am heartbroken for my [terminated] colleagues ... [but] our faculty members continue to do the important, valuable jobs they were hired to do," she stated. "The consolidation ... will not occur by flipping a switch, and, as the chancellor mentioned in this week's Act 50 Senate hearing, there is still much work to be done—and our faculty will be doing much of the heavy lifting ... the consolidation work cannot progress without the efforts and expertise of our faculty."

While APSCUF leaves faculty and students out to dry, allows educational programs to end and COVID-19 is running rampant in schools, new organizations, rank-and-file committees, are required to defend education. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (PERFSC), formed in 2020 by educators and independent of the pro-corporate unions, is fighting to save education from destruction and stop the pandemic to save lives.

PASSHE faculty and students who are interested in fighting the attacks on public education, the herd immunity policy of the ruling class which has resulted in the deaths for over 830,000 people in the United States and almost 5.5 million globally, should contact us today. The PERFSC and WSWs will do everything to assist you in the formation and development of a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact