

PA House Education Committee
Testimony from
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Good morning, Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical issue of college affordability and other challenges facing institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania.

I am Chris Brussalis, President of Point Park University. I also serve as adjunct professor of management and policy at the Heinz College of Carnegie Mellon University, a position I have held for over 30 years. In addition, I served as longtime president and later chairman of The Hill Group Inc., a national management consulting firm. As an engaged scholar-practitioner for over 33 years, I have taught at the graduate level, provided advice and counsel to numerous *Fortune* 500 corporations, governments, large institutions, including many colleges and universities, and served in a variety of higher education executive leadership roles.

Before addressing the main topics, I would like to highlight two recent initiatives that demonstrate Point Park's commitment to students. When Philadelphia's University of the Arts closure was announced in May, we worked quickly to offer direct admissions and free, first-semester housing to affected students. Similarly, we collaborated with Pittsburgh Technical College to create pathways for their students to continue at Point Park after Pittsburgh Technical College's closure. I am pleased to report that over 60 students from these institutions have joined our community this semester.

While federal and state governments remain crucial partners, recent challenges like the FAFSA delays have strained many institutions, including ours. These issues have created uncertainty for students and families, complicating financial planning and potentially deterring some from pursuing higher education. I would urge you all to keep a watchful eye on the FAFSA situation this year and assist us in making sure the delays and problems with this crucial financial aid tool do not negatively impact students, families, and institutions like they did this past year.

A key challenge we face is demonstrating the value of a college degree in today's climate of skepticism towards higher education. At Point Park, we emphasize our career-ready approach, integrating real-world experience and professional skills development into our curriculum. Our Professional Career-Readiness Center offers comprehensive support from career mapping to job placement, helping students see a clear path from education to employment.

Like other independent nonprofit AICUP schools, we educate a higher percentage of fully-Pell eligible students than many of the state's public colleges and university. On average 40 to 45 percent of our student body come from families with great financial need. I am proud to report that 99 percent of our incoming freshmen receive financial aid, with an average assistance package of \$32,095. The net tuition at Point Park, like many independent nonprofit AICUP

schools, is less than the average state-related school tuition without receiving an annual state supplement.

We are committed to making higher education accessible and affordable. Our recently launched “Bison Book Bundle” program simplifies textbook costs by providing all required course materials before classes start for a flat fee, reducing textbook expenses by 40 percent. We have also worked diligently to keep room and board costs down. Additionally, we offer generous monthly payment plans, allowing families to spread tuition payments throughout the year, over 12 months, which is more generous and a longer payment plan than most schools offer. These initiatives, combined with our substantial financial aid packages, demonstrate Point Park's dedication to keeping college affordable for all students, regardless of their financial circumstances

I am pleased to share that even with the strong headwinds higher education is facing nationally and across Pennsylvania, Point Park was able to increase the size of our new incoming student class this year by 10 percent and our retention rate increased by over 3 percentage points.

There is much for all of us to do to make a college education available, attainable, and affordable for all Pennsylvanians.

I urge this committee to partner with universities like Point Park to:

1. Fully fund PHEAA's Pennsylvania State Grant Program, which helps Pennsylvania residents pursue higher education based on financial need.
2. Encourage all higher education institutions to engage in collaborative approaches that save costs. Currently Point Park is part of a working group of schools in Western Pennsylvania, exploring ways that we can share services among our institutions. Even though we are not part of a “system,” we believe that working together to create efficiencies is the right thing to do, for both our campuses and our students.
 - a. While many of the shared services opportunities will be relatively easy to implement, some may require action by leaders in Harrisburg. For instance, Pennsylvania statute, 22 P.S. § 501(c), relating to college campus police or public safety officers at private universities, could be amended to allow private college police forces to collaborate across jurisdictions, enhancing student safety and reducing costs. The law could be modified to include provisions for inter-institutional agreements, enabling private college police departments to share resources, conduct joint training, and respond to incidents on each other's campuses. This approach is already being implemented across Pennsylvania with municipal police forces. Expanding this model to allow private college police forces to work together could lead to more efficient use of personnel and equipment, potentially reducing costs while improving campus safety through shared resources and expanded coverage.

3. When proposals and conversations turn to utilizing state or federal funds to provide “Free College” or “Free Tuition,” it is crucial to include independent nonprofit AICUP schools like Point Park in these discussions, so they might benefit all Pennsylvanians. Independent non-profit schools like Point Park educate 45 percent of all need-eligible students in the commonwealth. Our institutions graduate 40 percent of teachers, 49 percent of adult students, 54 percent of minority students, and 67 percent of nurses in Pennsylvania. If you do not include independent nonprofit AICUP schools like Point Park, you are excluding all these students – in effect penalizing them for attending the college of their choosing.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize the critical importance of addressing the challenges facing higher education in Pennsylvania. The issues we have discussed today – from FAFSA delays to demonstrating the value of a college degree – have significant implications for students, institutions, and our commonwealth’s economic future.

Point Park University remains committed to providing accessible, high-quality education that prepares students for successful careers. Our recent initiatives to support students from closing institutions and our focus on career readiness demonstrate this commitment. However, we cannot do it alone.

I urge this Committee and the broader legislature and the Governor to act on the recommendations I have outlined. By fully funding grant programs, encouraging institutional collaboration, and ensuring equitable support for all types of higher education institutions, we can make significant strides in improving college affordability and accessibility.

The challenges we face are complex, but the potential rewards of a well-educated workforce are immense. By working together – institutions, policymakers, and communities – we can ensure that Pennsylvania remains a leader in higher education and continues to provide opportunities for all its residents.

Thank you for your time and attention to these critical issues. I look forward to continuing this important dialogue and partnering with you to strengthen higher education in our state.

Thank you.

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