

College Affordability

Written Testimony

Presented by:

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We appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony to the Pennsylvania House Education Committee about college affordability. As two community college professionals who have spent nearly their entire professional careers serving students and supporting local communities, this testimony on affordability is focused specifically on community colleges and their importance to the welfare and prosperity of the residents of the Commonwealth.

Executive Summary

Pennsylvania community colleges provide affordable, accessible, and high-quality educational opportunities to the communities they serve. As a mission keystone, Pennsylvania community colleges work diligently to remain affordable, thereby providing Pennsylvania residents with improved access to a postsecondary education. These educational opportunities can lead to more fulfilling jobs with higher salaries and better job security which ultimately benefits their families and the communities they live in. Pennsylvania Highlands Community College serves west-central Pennsylvania, a rural and economically challenged area of the Commonwealth. While serving this population is logistically difficult, providing access to an affordable postsecondary education is not only important to the economic prosperity of the region but also to individual families who are often looking to break the cycle of generational poverty. Funding from the Commonwealth and from local sponsors remains mission critical and helps community colleges like Pennsylvania Highlands Community College to remain affordable and accessible.

The Community College Promise

Community colleges were founded on the principle of providing affordable, accessible and quality educational opportunities to the residents of the communities they serve. And because community colleges are based on the “open door” concept, we serve a diverse student body, many of whom are first-generation college students, economically challenged, working adults, or individuals just seeking to improve their skills for better employment opportunities. Many of our students take advantage of their local community colleges in their own backyards to educate their way out of poverty, thereby changing the destinies of entire families and finally breaking the chain of generational poverty. Our graduates stimulate local economies by filling jobs as highly trained professionals; most choose to live locally where they will work, volunteer, recreate, raise their families and participate in the local economy for their lifetimes.

Demography of the Pennsylvania Highlands Community College Service Region

To best understand the need for affordable higher education in the Pennsylvania Highlands Community College service region, it is important to understand the demography of the residents of rural west-central Pennsylvania. The College primarily serves five counties (4,296 square miles of rural Pennsylvania) and a population of approximately 527,000 residents. These counties include Blair, Cambria, Centre, Huntingdon, and Somerset.

- The population density of these counties is sparse, ranging from 50-191 residents per square mile, making serving the residents of those counties logistically difficult and expensive. For comparison, Allegheny County has a population density greater than 1,600 residents per square mile.
- The median household income of the residents living in those five counties is below the Pennsylvania median income with an average of 14.5% of residents currently living below the poverty line (with some of our counties near 17%). The Pennsylvania average is approximately 12%.
- Approximately 50% of the population (with a range of 36-60%) in these counties have only high school diplomas or did not graduate high school.

Pennsylvania Highlands Community College Student Characteristics

Last academic year, as the second smallest community college in the Commonwealth, Pennsylvania Highlands Community College served 1,746 “core” students (likely high school graduates) and nearly 1,700 dual enrollment students (current high school students). The College’s core student population greatly reflects the population of the counties we serve. The characteristics of our “core” students include:

- 45% of our students come from families earning \$30,000 or less annually.
- 63% receive either Pell grants, state grants, or FSEOG aid to help financially support their educational goals; nearly 1/3 of our students have the entirety of their tuition and fees covered by these financial supports.
- 30% are raising children.
- 20% are food insecure and/or need access to more personal hygiene items.
- 11% lack adequate transportation to the College.
- 35% are first generation college students.
- 70 students are served by the College’s Keystone Education Yields Success (KEYS) program, an organization designed to help TANF and Food Stamp recipients succeed in community college by providing wrap around support to participants.

- More than 1/3 of our students attend classes part-time with many simultaneously working to sustain themselves and their families.
- 43% of our students are 22 years or older and have returned to college to train or retrain for a new career.
- 100% of our students have the courage to attend college to pursue their educational goals despite their personal obstacles.

Affordability: Mission Critical at Pennsylvania Highlands Community College

Pennsylvania Highlands Community College's mission is to offer an inclusive, supportive, and affordable environment that empowers students to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in work, life, and the pursuit of lifelong learning. Therefore, "affordability" is an important keystone of the college's mission and drives our strategic planning processes and day-to-day decision making. We understand that the more affordable our tuition, the more accessible the institution is to the residents of our service region. Below are some examples of how the College works to remain affordable, accessible and educationally relevant to the communities we serve:

- The College is administratively lean and is not burdened by significant capital expenses.
- Cambria County residents receive significant discounts due to the local monetary sponsorship.
- The College's tuition and fees remain significantly below local higher education institutions. In fact, Pennsylvania Highlands Community College remains significantly less expensive than local public universities (109% less expensive as compared to the College's sponsored county and 63% less expensive as compared to non-sponsored counties, on average) and local private colleges/universities (388% less expensive as compared to the sponsored county and 256% less expensive than the non-sponsored counties, on average).
- In collaboration with the College's Board of Trustees, the College has implemented only modest tuition and fee increases over the past five years, keeping these adjustments well below the average inflation rates for Pennsylvania and the nation.
- Tuition and fees are easily found on the College's website. We take pride in our transparent cost of attendance.
- Since most of our students live at home, there are no additional room and board expenses for students to pay, saving students thousands of dollars annually.
- The Pennsylvania Highlands Community College Foundation provided \$157,740 in scholarships to students last year. These scholarships help bridge the financial gap for many, allowing them to attend College and complete their college credential.

- Last year, the College served nearly 1,700 dual enrollment students from 52 different Pennsylvania school districts – effectively accelerating their college education. Dual enrollment students receive a significant discount (~1/3 normal cost) over standard tuition and fees. Twenty-two students graduated from the College with their associate degree before graduating from college. Since dual enrollment classes are not financial aid eligible, scholarships are also available for dual enrollment students who cannot afford to take dual enrollment with the College.
- The Foundation provides emergency funds to students to assist in unexpected expenses that could impede a student’s ability to complete their classes. Examples include the purchase of new tires for their car, paying for a short stay at a hotel, and providing bus passes.
- The College and the Foundation partner to provide a food pantry on campus for students who may need a snack or a take-home meal to support their nutritional needs.
- The KEYS program provides transportation assistance and a laptop loan program, along with other supportive programming to assist students in completing their academic goals.
- Open Educational Resources (free textbooks) are available in 10 courses, further reducing the total cost of attendance for our students. The library houses another 18 unique textbooks as learning resources; students can use the textbooks while in the library.

Affordability Across Pennsylvania’s 15 Community Colleges

Pennsylvania Highlands Community College is only a microcosm of the impact that Pennsylvania community colleges have on the residents and communities of the Commonwealth. In total, Pennsylvania’s 15 community colleges served 230,00 students from all 67 Pennsylvania counties last academic year. Our 17,600 employees are student-centered and work towards providing affordable, accessible and high-quality education to the residents of all those counties. Affordability continues to be top-of-mind for each of our institutions.

As examples:

- At the Community College of Allegheny County, the CCAC Educational Foundation awarded almost \$650,000 in scholarships in AY 2023-24 to CCAC students and awarded over \$51,000 in Student Emergency Gap funding to 217 students in FY 2023-24.

- At Bucks County Community College, only 11 percent of students take out federal loans, and the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) in the 2023/24 academic year helped students avoid over \$1 million dollars in textbook costs.
- At Butler County Community College, nearly 80 percent of its student's graduate debt-free. This is due to a combination of federal and state aid, but also a very robust and diverse scholarship program that last year awarded over \$240,000 in scholarships.
- At Delaware County Community College, strategic enrollment partnerships with sponsoring school districts to discount tuition for students.
- At Harrisburg Area Community College, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, the HACC Foundation, distributed: \$502,200.98 in scholarship funding to 441 students from July 1, 2023-June 30, 2024, and \$71,078.92 in emergency assistance funding to 127 students.
- At Lehigh Carbon Community College, Foundation and College scholarships were awarded to 1,355 students totaling \$ 1,616,413 in 2023-24. Emergency grants from the LCCC Foundation are also possible for students in need.
- At Luzerne County Community College, an Early College program offers discounted tuition to high school students, and additional funding is available to these students. In the prior year, over 75 percent of LCCC's Early College population received tuition assistance from their high school, dual enrollment grants funded by the local intermediate unit, or generous EITC donations approaching \$350,000.
- At Montgomery County Community College, its Board of Trustees did not increase tuition from FY17-FY22, which translates to a \$12.9 million projected cost avoidance to the students over that period. In FY24, the Montgomery County Community College Foundation and external grants totaled over \$900,000 in scholarships and emergency funding to over 500 students.
- At Northampton Community College, its Foundation awarded \$1.5 million in scholarships that assisted nearly 1,000 students. During the last 24 months, NCC's Spartan Aid program provided more than \$193,000 in emergency funds to 379 students.
- At Reading Area Community College, 924 students received 1,362 scholarships for \$1,543,781.63 distributed in 2023-24. Additionally, RACC has a Student Emergency Assistant Fund to assist students in need.
- At Westmoreland County Community College, students received \$135,720 in academic scholarships provided by donors to the Educational Foundation. Faculty work to contain the costs of books and supplies with Open Educational Resources (OER), in-house lab manuals, and extensive library resources.

Pennsylvania's community colleges collectively work to address basic needs, which has a real impact on affordability. By providing food through our collective pantry programs, we are

allowing students to put their funds toward other important needs in their life, including their education.

Conclusion

We believe that community colleges offer affordable, accessible, and high-quality educational opportunities to students who might otherwise be unable to attend college due to financial and accessibility barriers. The annual funding provided to community colleges by the Commonwealth and local sponsors is a crucial investment, enabling community colleges to continue offering affordable higher education to the communities we serve. History has shown that community colleges are effective and efficient stewards of taxpayer money and worthy of investment.

On a more personal level, students at Pennsylvania Highlands Community College discover that they can dream big, even at a small institution like ours. Our experiences indicate that community colleges bring hope to students in places where hope is often scarce.

Thank you.

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