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Testimony to the House Education Committee

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Chairmen Sonney and Longietti, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss how Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education universities are meeting the needs of more than 93,000 students and supporting their continued learning success amid a pandemic.

For the past nine years, I have had the honor of serving as president of Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I also represent an outstanding group of university presidents as chair of the State System's Commission of President. All of my colleagues are ensuring a high-quality, student-centered education at their universities, in-person and virtually, thanks to remarkably talented faculty, administration, and staff.

I call to your attention three key points and three requests for continued support and include more detailed information thereafter.

Key Points

First, the cost of the pandemic – in loss of revenue and increased expenses; in stress and isolation; and in opportunities delayed or lost– is immense and will be woven into the fabric of the future of our universities, our communities, our students, our employees, and our commonwealth.

Second, the faculty, staff, and administrators who make up our universities have demonstrated tremendous agility, resilience, and creativity in pursuing our missions in the most challenging circumstances we have seen in our careers and our lifetimes. Our teams stepped up and did whatever was necessary to keep our students moving toward their life goals, while keeping our students, our communities, and themselves as healthy and safe as possible.

Third, our students have faced exceptional stress, isolation, and loss, resulting in increased demand for mental health services and academic and other support systems. Some of our most disadvantaged students faced the worst challenges – many without access to broadband internet, without adequate finances to live as part-time jobs at local businesses disappeared, and some without a safe place to live. But in spite of all this, our students demonstrated their true mettle – persevering with continued strong academic results in the spring and fall semesters of 2020. I hope that you are as proud of them as I am.

Requests for Continued Support

My colleagues and I are most appreciative of your strong support over the last year and into the future. I would ask your continued support in three areas.

First, the commonwealth must continue and accelerate efforts to make broadband internet available to all its residents. The pandemic clearly demonstrated that access to broadband is the door to education at all levels. That won't change in a post-pandemic Pennsylvania and far too many families still don't have a key to that door.

Second, while the situation seems to be improving, we can use your help in making sure that COVID testing and vaccines are distributed broadly and equitably to our students, faculty, and staff. Statewide direction and guidance are helpful, but individual counties are resourced at very different levels, resulting in significant variation in ready availability to these essentials to a return to normal.

Third, please support continued flexibility in deadlines, regulations, and operations to allow universities to make the very best decisions to support their students, employees, and communities. One size does not fit all in a landscape as diverse as Pennsylvania.

While this is not a budget hearing, I would also ask that you encourage and support your colleagues in finding and making available additional recovery funds as we all work to dig out of the COVID hole and get to the new normal.

Detailed Information

The following demonstrates the IUP journey, mirroring that of our sister institutions:

Pivot to on-line and hybrid instruction

- Delivered 3,300 synchronous sessions in the first week of online learning
- Received the "Top COVID Pivot" award from the Pittsburgh Technology Council
- Held a highly successful virtual orientation for the first time in university history, with 1,750 students and families being oriented and tested in a fully online modality
- Installed a total of 115 Owl Pro cameras in preparation for hybrid courses that replace a portion of face-to-face instruction—limiting the number of students physically in the classroom in accordance with recommendations from the CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health
- Involved more than 50 employees and students as part of the COVID-19 Planning Committee that includes 11 Action Teams to provide recommendations to IUP leadership
- Offered faculty and staff Summer and Fall Academy training to upskill and gain new perspectives in using technology in teaching, organizing, planning events and providing support to students; many participated
- Provided faculty with a Teaching Online Certificate Course giving a student's perspective and guidance on designing an online course using various course management tools

- Held a week of training in how to better serve at-risk populations in the online environment, in which more than 100 faculty participated
- Offered a number of sessions on using technology successfully for teaching, extra-curricular programming and increasing student engagement at IUP's annual Tech Day in January
- Designed to support students with challenges associated with on-line learning— students participated in a free week-long course prior to the start of spring semester titled "Online Learning 101 for Students"

Keeping our campus and community safe

- Trained employees in the custodial and facilities departments for use of CDC-approved equipment along with daily cleaning and disinfecting requirements for all buildings
- Provided free safety kits in the fall and spring with hand sanitizer and reusable face coverings to all students and employees
- Continued to provide information about the virus, testing, and opportunities for vaccination
- Offered university housing to students in the fall and spring retrofitted to a single bedroom/single bathroom or two-person occupancy, following CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health guidance for safety
- Placed temperature kiosks and hand-sanitizing stations throughout campus
- Retrofitted dining facilities for limited dine-in: students can order on-line and "grab and go"
- Installed plexiglass barriers in student-facing offices, classrooms and facilities
- Made upgrades to the HVAC system to improve air circulation
- Tested students, who are asymptomatic and symptomatic at no cost
- Provided free on-campus PCR testing for all students as of Jan. 11, 2021 through an independent national bio health company
- Students who test positive are contacted by Health Services medical professionals to offer information on self-isolation and care, and begin campus-based contact notification system, using emails and texts to students who are identified as close contacts of COVID-19 positive individuals
- Limited the number of on campus residents with a "fall rebalance" approach to an average of 1,800 (fall) and 1,500 (spring) in housing
- Offered hybrid classes, limiting the number of people in classrooms
- Held Commencement for the Class of 2020 graduates—spring, and fall on-line
- Allowed students the flexibility to return or stay home after the Thanksgiving break
- Revised spring break to be seven non-consecutive class days
- Delayed start of in-person classes for three weeks
- Continued to work closely with the community, including landlords communicating and sharing information on how to keep off-campus students as safe as possible, and following CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health recommendations.

Supporting the needs of our students

- Released students from their housing and dining contracts with refunds for a portion of their fees—amounting to nearly \$10 million
- Distributed \$4,955,760 in CARES Act funding to 5,277 students to assist with eligible expenses such as food, housing, course materials, technology, healthcare, and utilities
- Established the Student Assistance Fund raising more than \$444,000 to date, with awards to 464 students
- Distributed \$3 million to support our students with a one-time grant of \$300 to each one in September 2020
- Implemented a new five-part payment plan for fall, with no tuition or fee increase for fall 2020 and spring 2021 (There was a modest fee increase for certain music students)
- Implemented a more liberal pass-fail policy for spring 2020 and extended pass-fail deadline for fall 2020 as a recommendation from the Student Government Association
- Delivered student life programming that included:
 - The Weekly Student Digest: about opportunities to remain connected with the university and one another
 - Two virtual events weekly: movie night to stargazing, hosted by IUP’s student programming group, STATIC
 - “Find Your People:” A special ongoing feature launched this spring to highlight opportunities for students to engage with groups that meet their interests
 - IUP’s semi-annual fall and spring “get to know your student organizations” became virtual-IUP Day and Winter Warmup

- Provided Housing to students who cannot safely be at home or return to their homes to continue their studies; also made it available during summer and during any breaks
- Set-up a computer lab with social distancing and limited number of students in the lab at one time to students without other resources
- Loaned hundreds of laptops to employees to allow them to continue their work and to support students while telecommuting
- Contacted nearly 900 students by phone, text, or email to “check in” and referred students in need to existing university resources such as tutors, emergency funds, Disability Access and Advising, counseling, and case management support services
- Established the Hawks Q&A Center in the fall semester to provide a “one-stop shop” question and answer center for students offering evening and weekend hours to better meet student schedules
- Continued to reach students through telehealth counseling sessions provided by the Counseling Center

Sustained Academic Success

While many national surveys show that students are struggling to complete coursework, remain focused, and attend classes regularly due to remote learning, the academic standing for IUP's student population remained consistent.

- IUP's Percentage of fall, full-time freshman who completed first semester in good academic standing was consistent at about 80% from fall 2017 to fall 2020: fall 2017 - 81%; fall 2018 - 82%; fall 2019 - 79%; and fall 2020 - 80%. (Good standing at IUP is defined as above a 2.0 GPA.)
- IUP's first generation fall, full-time student GPA average at the end of the first semester was consistent from fall 2017 to fall 2020: fall 2017 - 2.5; fall 2018 - 2.6; fall 2019 - 2.4; and fall 2020 - 2.6. IUP's first-generation population of new, first-time full-time freshman is about 27%. IUP's PELL students – fall, full-time freshmen who are PELL eligible had strong GPAs around 3.0 from 2017 to 2020: fall 2017 - 3.0; fall - 2.9; fall 2019 - 2.9; and fall 2020 -2.96.
- IUP's percentage of PELL students have increased from 56% in fall 2017 to 62% in fall 2020.

Financial Impact

The pandemic altered our timeline for financial sustainability within system redesign. Budget deficits increased due to:

- Released students from their housing and dining contracts, and returned a portion of most fees—\$10 million
- Exhausted institutional CARES Act I funding—\$5 million
- Incurred additional expenses related to technology, equipment, training, broadband access and facility upgrades related to ventilation—\$2 million
- One-time assistance grant provided to all students in September 2020—\$3 million
- Lost revenues associated with student tuition, fees, conferences, camps, athletic competitions, and arts & entertainment—\$8.3 million

Recruitment concerns for 2021 – despite our online orientation and recruitment efforts, the response from students and families has not been close to the events offered in a traditional, in-person format.

Opportunities

Despite facing many challenges, the pandemic has changed our way of doing business on many levels and has provided valuable insight into new opportunities. It brought more focus to our collaborative efforts and strengthened our work together.

- Engagement with student groups such as the feedback from the Student Government Association to adjust the pass/fail policy
- Training of more faculty in distance learning
- New markets and the elimination of barriers to student access and success due to flexible program modalities

- Community partnership with IUP and Indiana Regional Medical Center that provide local and same-day COVID-19 testing, led by IUP professor of biology Dr. Narayanaswamy Bharathan with IUP equipment on loan to IRMC
 - Since May 1, more than 15,000 completed COVID-19 tests, three new staff trained at IRMC, and a new testing procedure piloted by Dr. Bharathan at IRMC significantly reduced testing time and costs while maintaining testing accuracy
- Collaboration among IUP professors and the Indiana Borough on wastewater testing analysis for the community at large and for specific university residence halls—providing important mitigation information and research experiences for students; work is underway to launch this project in the spring semester.

The Future

Ingenuity, resilience, and unbridled commitment to our mission continues as we plan for fall 2021 and the implementation of our new strategic plan. Here is what you can expect:

- Keeping student success as our focus—ordering all our resources and all our work to ensure each student is successful—both here and following graduation.
- Embracing our doctoral research mission as both a distinguishing characteristic of the university and a call to action, that all of our students and faculty are engaged in research that will enhance their understanding of the world, and how others understand the world
- Creating a community that embraces and values diversity, equity, and inclusion for its own sake, as well as its significance to student success

In closing, thank you for this opportunity to offer remarks on behalf of IUP, a proud member of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. Thank you for your continued support of the universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education and our mission to provide high-quality and affordable education.