



COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

**PA House of Representatives Education Committee
Informational Meeting on College Affordability
September 17, 2024 – 2:00 PM**

Chair Schweyer, Chair Topper, members of the Education Committee, and fellow presenters – thank you for your time today and for the opportunity to highlight the critical issue of college affordability. For those I have not yet met, my name is Bashar Hanna, and I serve as President of Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania. A state-owned, PASSHE institution, Commonwealth University serves over 11,000 undergraduate and graduate students across campuses in Bloomsburg, Clearfield, Lock Haven, and Mansfield. We are proud of the work we have done to remain one of the most affordable four-year options for Pennsylvanians, and I am honored to be able to share some of that with you today. College affordability is a critical priority for us at CU. I have the honor of testifying toward solely due to the power of education. I am an immigrant and a first generation college student and spoke no English in 5th grade. If it weren't for amazing teachers in Allentown PA, I would have never a bachelor's degree, and certainly not a master's or PhD. I was a PELL eligible student. This is precisely why affordability is very personal for my team and me.

Tuition Freeze

A significant driver in Commonwealth University's ability to maintain our affordability edge has been the incredible partnership with you, Pennsylvania's General Assembly, over the past several years. We have benefited from bipartisan support for sustained, increased financial appropriation provided to Pennsylvania's state-owned universities in recent budget cycles, and we have passed along the benefit directly to our students by freezing tuition across PASSHE institutions an unprecedented seven years in a row.

Had tuition rose with inflation, it would have increased by 25% over that period. Instead, tuition today at Commonwealth University is \$7,716 per academic year, the same as it was in 2018. To be sure, this is still a significant investment for Pennsylvania families, but by maintaining price stability for nearly a decade, we have helped keep the pathway to college open for the thousands of students we serve. Additionally, 37% of our first-year students are awarded Pell grants, and over 2,800 students across CU were PHEAA eligible in the 2022/23 academic year.

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Early College

As important as the annual cost of education is ensuring that students can complete their degree in a timely manner – or even get a head start. At Commonwealth University, we are proud to have relationships with over 100 area school districts near our campuses. We serve over 500 high school students who enroll in college courses concurrent with their high school education. These students take advantage of the opportunity to earn college credits that count toward a bachelor's degree. Most of our general education courses and some introductory level major courses are available, and our Early College staff works closely with high school guidance counselors to find options that fit best with student schedules. The cost of tuition for an early college student is \$115 per credit, or \$345 for a 3-credit course. A 75% reduction compared to base tuition, our Early College Program provides a significant affordability advantage and allows students to pursue college degrees in less time. In fact, some of our Early College students who enroll at Commonwealth University have reduced time-to-graduation by a full semester or more.

Credit for Prior Learning

Keeping college affordable also involves ensuring that students do not take or retake credits for learning they have already accomplished, even if that learning took place outside of the traditional higher education setting. At Commonwealth University, we are particularly proud of the work we have done for military students and – most recently – our partnership with the Pennsylvania State Police.

CU's Military Academic Credit Review Board (MAC-RB) is a team of faculty, staff, and students committed to assisting those who have served – or are currently serving – in the U.S. armed forces. This team conducts a focused analysis of all occupations, trainings, and deployments an individual military student experienced over the course of their career in the armed forces and then provides appropriate CU credit equivalencies. This program helps ensure that military service and experience is acknowledged as equivalent academic credit on an individualized basis and in a manner most advantageous to the student's educational and career aspirations.

A similar program was jointly announced earlier this summer by Commonwealth University and the Pennsylvania State Police. This new agreement allows cadets graduating from the Pennsylvania State Police Academy to receive 20 credits at CU upon graduation toward a criminal



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justice degree at any of our campus locations. By recognizing the substantial training these cadets have already received, CU helps our state troopers get closer to degree attainment and career mobility.

Scholarship Support & Emergency Aid

While state support is critical to maintaining our affordability advantage, Commonwealth University students also benefit from the incredible generosity of alumni and donors through our affiliated Foundations, the Bloomsburg University Foundation, the Lock Haven University Foundation, and the newly created Mansfield University Mountaineer Foundation. These entities collectively brought in over \$30 million in donor support during the 2023/24 fiscal year – a record-breaking year for Commonwealth University. These dollars are crucial in filling in need-based gaps and providing scholarship support to students to keep higher education attainable and affordable regardless of background or means. Additionally, Commonwealth University offers university-funded scholarships for first-year and transfer students based on their academic performance, helping to reduce the cost of attendance for qualifying students.

Internal Cost Management

In addition to external sources of funding (state appropriations, tuition and fees, donor support, etc.), Commonwealth University takes seriously its responsibility to judiciously steward resources in order to maintain affordability for our students. Over the past several years – both prior to and following integration – our campuses have reduced staffing levels to more appropriately align with actual enrollment. In 2017, our campuses had a combined employee count of 2,144. As of the 2023/24 academic year, that number was 1,568 – a reduction of 576. Importantly, this rightsizing was achieved through System-level enhanced retirement packages, voluntary separations, and off-lining vacant positions. We have built a leadership culture of assessing every vacancy at the level of the President and his Cabinet – rather than automatically filling the position, we look for opportunities to repurpose, combine duties, and assess whether the role remains mission-critical and student-facing.



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As a state-owned institution, we recognize our special responsibility to provide a high-quality, high-value education at an affordable cost. Through these steps, and with the continued support of Governor Shapiro and the Pennsylvania General Assembly, we are optimistic about the future of Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania and the impact we can have on our students' lives.

I look forward to today's discussion. Additionally, should you have questions or require further information following this committee meeting hearing, please do not hesitate to reach me at president@commonwealthu.edu.

Sincerely,

Bashar W. Hanna, Ph.D.
President