

**HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING  
SEPTEMBER 17, 2024  
STATEMENT BY ZION SYKES  
PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY PARK UNDERGRADUATE ASSOCIATION**

Hello House Education Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you all and share a bit about the student experience. My name is Zion Sykes and I have the privilege of representing the 46,000 undergraduate students of the Pennsylvania State University, University Park Campus. As I'm sure you are aware, throughout the entirety of this great commonwealth, Penn State holds the rank of largest and most robust in terms of students and resources available. With over 160 years of history, countless accolades, accomplished alumni, and people who bleed white and blue, this is a proud institution.

Putting my Penn State pride aside, I want to highlight an issue that is impacting students from universities spanning across Pennsylvania. There are **thousands** of students and those **wishing** to be students who are suffering as a result of the ever-increasing affordability crisis in higher education. This in part can be attributed to (within recent memory), the lack of funding that our state has given to institutions that support our students, and therefore, the commonwealth.

I want to talk to you a bit about what the opportunity to have an affordable education has done for me. Coming from Philadelphia, being a first-generation and homeless student at the time of my college application process, I cannot understate how important affordability was. I didn't even think that college was within my reach until I learned about the discount Penn State provides. This, paired with the generosity of scholarships from both my high school and Penn State allowed me to move forward. With that, I took a leap of faith, not just regarding furthering my education, but taking leaps outside the classroom as well. To just list a few of the things that I've been able to do, I want to mention:

- opportunity to gain experience doing my research
- The chance to meet a variety of amazing individuals (some of whom are your fellow legislators)
- Work towards improving our basic needs support systems that we have here on campus
- Sit as a student representative to our local government
- Gain Professional Development Experience
- This past Summer, I had the chance to complete a 2-month-long internship in Tokyo, Japan. This shifted my perspective of the world and helped me to see what I want to do.
- Another study abroad where I honed my Spanish-speaking skills.
- Learn how to advocate on behalf of and represent myself and others, which embodies my current role as student body president (representing 10s of thousands of students).

I have been afforded so many opportunities so far, and mean it when I say that I am thankful that I took that walk into the dark and forged my own path at Penn State. I surely would not be the same person I am now without these experiences.

When it comes to next steps, apart from finishing my honors thesis and walking across the stage during graduation in May, I am hopeful that after I graduate, I will be able to attend law school and further my studies that way. But who knows, maybe further down the line, I could be sitting where you are, representing my community.

Ultimately, I say all of this not to brag, or waste your time. I say this because there are so many students like myself around the Commonwealth. So many people are full of potential and worthy of so much more than what they have available to them. I don't think that I'm unique in the sense that I found success, I think that sadly, I'm unique in the fact that I found a chance.

Affordability, whether it be, the cost of textbooks, reasonable housing options, healthcare for students, and so much more impact a person's decision to matriculate. But even more, it impacts their ability to succeed and **thrive**.

If I were to get into the stats of it all, I might mention that over 30% of students attending this campus alone have faced food or housing insecurity at some point in their Penn State career. Or just how much of an impact needs insecurity has not on just a student's grades, but their overall health.

I think people talk and joke about "broke college students" an awful lot, but when it comes to addressing the issues they face, seldom are things done. On campus, **I'm proud** to say that through offices like Student Care and Advocacy and Off-Campus Housing Support, our administration tries to fill the gaps. **I'm proud** of organizations like the Lion's Pantry, which is a food pantry run by students, that services **all members** of the university, or the UPUA (the student government) which has been able to create a basic needs endowment that raised over \$100,000 to assist students in the future.

These are the things that students like myself **see** as helping students. What we don't see is an adequate investment in higher education. At Penn State specifically, that looks like fairer funding for Penn State to support the more than 42,000 Pennsylvania resident undergraduate students who attend campuses across the commonwealth. I can't speak as much for other universities, but Penn Staters contribute more to their communities than they get out and are change-makers in the classroom, on the field, and in all other college relations. When we have well-supported students, we have a well-supported, prosperous, and more educated commonwealth.

So I'd like to leave you all with this reminder that overall tuition set by our trustees is important, but there is **so much more**, from standing state appropriations to potential legislative changes that impact the overall affordability of our commonwealth's academic institutions (and especially) Penn State. And you all have the opportunity to **write the rules** that will change not my experience (I'm almost done), but that of future students.

Thank you for this time!