

State System makes progress with ‘redesign’

Board votes to allow universities flexibility to increase financial aid, accept students from disaster-stricken regions

Harrisburg – Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education continues to move forward with its effort to redesign itself to better serve students and the Commonwealth.

More than half a dozen task groups will be deployed to provide expertise and perspective on specific objectives related to the three System priorities previously identified by the Board of Governors— ensuring student success, leveraging university strengths and transforming governance and leadership structures. Regular progress reports on the task groups will be provided at each quarterly meeting of the Board of Governors and on a new website being launched today (www.passhe.edu/SystemRedesign).

The focused task groups will develop actionable recommendations on a range of specific issues, including how to define student success; how the universities can better serve adult learners; and how they can work more collaboratively in the areas of pricing, purchasing and the provision of services.

“We are moving with precision and speed to address specific issues through these task groups,” said State System Interim Chancellor Karen M. Whitney. “Each will be a small collection of experts who will engage various constituencies, where appropriate, and organize themselves to deliver an outcome within 90 days.”

The Board also took action at a special meeting Monday to give greater flexibility to the universities to address affordability and to open their doors to students who have had their educations disrupted by disasters, such as the recent hurricane in Puerto Rico.

“As we move forward to redesign the State System, we want to provide our universities greater flexibility to respond to student needs, and the ability to be more nimble to respond more quickly to those needs,” said Board of Governors Chairwoman Cynthia D. Shapira.

The first policy change approved by the Board on Monday allows the universities to expand the availability of need-based scholarships to Pennsylvania residents and merit-based scholarships to all students. Currently, the universities can use up to 5 percent of their tuition and fee revenue to provide such scholarships. Under the policy revision, that amount will be increased to 10 percent.

University presidents overwhelmingly supported the idea of expanding scholarships in a discussion that took place during the Board’s regular, quarterly meeting held last month.

“Perhaps what’s most important about this change is that each university will be

able to decide whether to expand the amount of financial aid it offers and set the guidelines for doing so,” Dr. Whitney said. “The System is moving in the direction of being more strategically focused by allowing certain day-to-day matters to be decided at the local level. That is a sea-change.”

The Board also established a new stand-alone policy allowing the universities to assist students whose education has been disrupted as the result of a disaster, such as those recently affected by Hurricane Irma in Puerto Rico and other areas of the Caribbean.

The Board historically has, on an individual basis, given the universities the ability to waive out-of-state tuition and fee rates to students whose colleges and universities have had to close at least temporarily because of a disaster, such as those impacted by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The new policy means the Board does not have to vote each time such a disaster occurs; the universities will have the discretion to take such action on their own.

With the new policy in place, the State System universities will be able to assist displaced students as soon as the upcoming winter term.

“Both of these actions are designed to better serve students and align with our stated priority of ensuring their success,” Ms. Shapira said. “They give our universities additional tools they can use right now to benefit students who are enrolled today, and those who will enroll in the future.”

Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education is the largest provider of higher education in the Commonwealth, enrolling more than 100,000 degree-seeking students and thousands more in certificate and other career-development programs. Collectively, the 14 universities that comprise the State System offer more than 2,300 degree and certificate programs in more than 530 academic areas. Nearly 520,000 State System university alumni live in Pennsylvania.

The State System universities are Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania. The universities also operate branch campuses in Oil City (Clarion), Freeport and Punxsutawney (IUP), and Clearfield (Lock Haven), and offer classes and programs at several regional centers, including the Dixon University Center in Harrisburg and in Center City in Philadelphia.