

Lawmakers study ways to fix funding

Funding: Divvying state money for higher education

HIGHER EDUCATION

New commission co-sponsored by Aument eyeing how money is divided

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Throughout the next year, a new commission of state legislators will meet to study the way it funds higher education in Pennsylvania.

With Pennsylvania ranked last in U.S. News & World Report’s “Best States for Higher Education” and No. 48 for tuition and fees, local higher education leaders say this commission is necessary if they want to attract students — and more importantly, students who want to live and work in Pennsylvania after they graduate.

Sen. Ryan Aument, R-Mount Joy, sponsored legislation to get the commission started. He was appointed to the commission by Senate Pro Tempore Sen. Joe Scarnati earlier this month. The commission met for the first time Tuesday and throughout the next year will hear from higher education policy experts about the needs of the state’s higher education institutions and best practices in other states.

In Pennsylvania, money for higher education is dis-

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tributed to the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education’s 14 universities, the four state-related institutions and the 14 community colleges. In the 2019-20 state budget, lawmakers appropriated nearly \$1.34 billion toward all of these institutions.

Still, Pennsylvania spent \$4,267 per student in 2017, falling well below the national average of \$7,625 spent per student. This has Pennsylvania’s public colleges and universities bracing for lower enrollment rates as the college- age population decreases in coming years, while also trying to implement creative

this month. “Maybe our funding ought to be aligned to that.”

Aument said on Wednesday that he’s bringing an “open mind” to the commission, which hopes to release a new funding formula for higher education next year.

John Sygielski, HACC’s president, said the community college sector hasn’t received the funding it needs to address the state’s workforce development issues. “We believe we are able to help the economy of Pennsylvania by providing the programs that our employers need, but many times we just need the funding to be able to provide those training programs,” Sygielski said.

result of the successful and industry-focused programs the college offers, Thaddeus Stevens President William Griscom said. This year, he said, there were 1,400 employers looking to fill 4,000 jobs. With 365 graduates, that’s 11 jobs available per graduate.

“(Pennsylvania has) significant infrastructure problems, we have an aging population, we have K-12 education (to fund) The pie is probably not going to get any larger for higher education,” Griscom said. “Finding the most rational way of dividing that pie is going to be one of the primary objectives of the commission.”

solutions to lower costs and make the schools more attractive.

New funding formula ‘overdue’

All of the higher education presidents LNP was able to reach — Millersville University, Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology and HACC — said a comprehensive look at how their institutions are funded is overdue. And all of them hope the Legislature shifts its focus to programs that are successful and provide funding based on that, instead of the institution’s historic precedent in Pennsylvania.

Aument agrees.

“Not to discourage any student from their academic passion, but I think there’s a real question about what we should subsidize, what we should as a Commonwealth pay for when in some areas, some academic disciplines degree areas there’s an oversaturation in the economy, and other areas significant shortfall,” Aument said in an interview in Harrisburg earlier

PASSHE schools share the same concern, said Millersville President Daniel Wubah, adding that having to divvy up money with so many other universities often means it needs to raise its costs to stay afloat, unlike state-related universities that have huge endowments, like Penn State and University of Pittsburgh. This has led Millersville to creatively cut costs, like cutting its housing and dining expenses by 3.4% this year and training professors to use online textbooks, which resulted in \$250,000 in student savings this year.

Fixing the funding mechanism and increasing funding for successful programs is just one part of solving the higher education problems in Pennsylvania, Wubah said.

“There’s no magic bullet,” Wubah added.

Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology got a \$4 million bump in the 2019-20 budget, which is a direct

Aside from his slot on the commission, Aument plans to introduce two pieces of legislation to address higher education problems, including a way to chip away at student debt and a possible EITClike program for businesses to contribute financially to higher education programs to set up a pipeline between employers and potential employees.

Sen. Scott Martin, R-Martic Township, also is getting involved in higher education issues. He was appointed to the PASSHE Board of Governors in July to take on some of the problems the state system is facing, including declining enrollment.

Finding the most rational way of dividing that (funding) pie is going to be one of the primary objectives of the commission.

William Griscom

president, Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology