Pennsylvania
State Board of Higher Education

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS AND
STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK OBTAINED MARCH-JUNE 2025

1. Introduction

Between March and June of 2025, the State Board of Higher Education (SBHE) executed a three-pronged stakeholder engagement process to inform the Board's strategic planning. This process yielded a rich array of feedback from a broad range of stakeholders, including higher education leaders from all sectors; K-12 leaders and counselors; high school and college students; college faculty and union members; economic and workforce development leaders; state and local government officials; college access and success organizations; and advocacy groups. Over the course of three months, our five regional hearings drew nearly 700 participants. An online survey, one-on-one conversations, and 14 smaller, targeted meetings with critical constituents provided important additional feedback. All told, this process engaged over 1,200 individual stakeholders from across the Commonwealth.

Each hearing was a public SBHE Board meeting with robust member participation. A strong quorum of Board members was present at each of the five hearings.

This document provides an overview of the stakeholder engagement process and participation patterns, as well as a summary of the feedback obtained during this time.

2. Stakeholder Engagement Process Overview

During the hearings , small group meetings, and through the online survey, the SBHE asked stakeholders to provide suggestions on how to address six draft strategic goals:

- Goal 1: Increase Postsecondary Credential Attainment
- Goal 2: Ensure Affordable Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials
- Goal 3. Support the Economic Development Needs of the Commonwealth
- Goal 4. Support the Workforce Development Needs of the Commonwealth
- Goal 5. Ensure Accountability and Efficient Use of State Funds
- Goal 6. Strengthen the Fiscal Health and Stability of the Higher Education Sector

A. Public hearings were held on the following dates and locations:

Table 1. SBHE hearing dates and locations

Hearing Date	Region	Location
March 20, 2025	Central	The Pennsylvania State University - University Park
March 217, 2025	Northeastern	Luzerne County Community College
April 17, 2025	Southeastern	St. Joseph's University
April 24, 2025	Southwestern	Community College of Allegheny County
May 13, 2025	Northwestern	Pennsylvania Western University - Edinboro

B. <u>An online survey</u> was administered from March 20 to June 4, 2025.; A QR code to the survey was listed on the SBHE website, publicized at hearings, and disseminated across the Commonwealth through other communication channels.

C. <u>Small group meetings</u> to solicit additional input included the following constituencies:
- Arcadia University Business and Workforce Development Meeting
- Chester County Workforce Development Board
- Community college presidents and Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges leadership
- Lancaster County commerce and higher education leaders
- Partner4Work
- Pennsylvania State Education Association
- Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education presidents and Chancellor
- Pennsylvania Workforce Association
- Pennsylvania Western University faculty
- Pennsylvania Western University - Edinboro students
- Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable
- Pittsburgh-area high school students
- Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Consortium for Higher Education

3. Analysis of Stakeholder Participation in the SBHE Strategic Planning Process

A. <u>Participation by Sector</u>

Pennsylvanians participating in the SBHE's stakeholder engagement process represented multiple sectors across the Commonwealth. Table 2 displays all participants by sector.

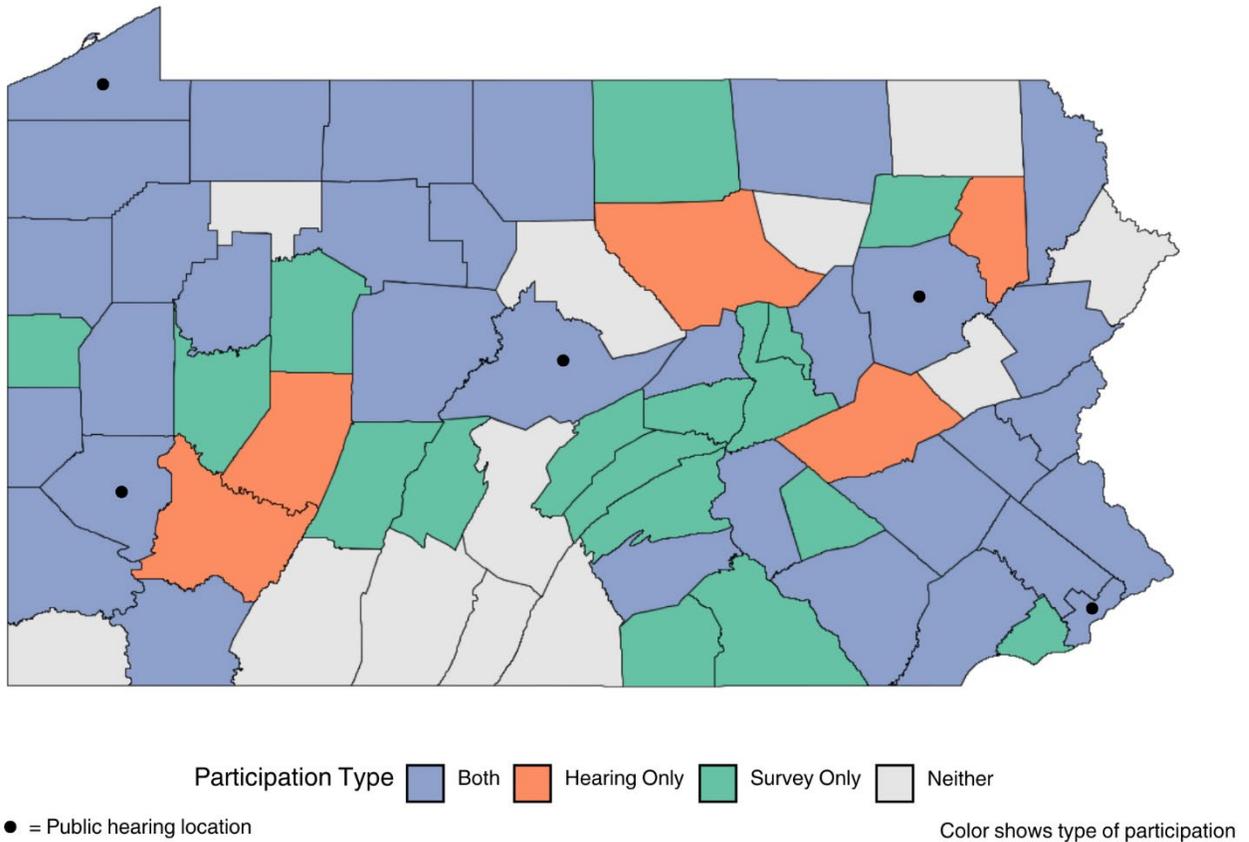Table 2. Overall participation across all stakeholder engagement activities by sector

Participant Sector	Total participants
College Access and Success Organizations	87
Advocacy Organizations	73
Business/Industry	70
Economic and Workforce Development	93
State and Local Government	193
Higher Education	444
K-12 Sector Leaders	32
K-12 Students	25
Labor	13
Parents	39
Postsecondary Students	25
State Board of Higher Education	30
Other**	91
TOTAL	1,215

**Other participants described themselves as trustees, adult education professionals, foundation professionals, nonprofit professionals, community education council members, education service providers, and consultants, among others.

B. Participation by County

The SBHE stakeholder engagement process gathered feedback from residents representing 55 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Participation by Pennsylvania county

Participation Type   Both   Hearing Only   Survey Only   Neither

● = Public hearing location   Color shows type of participation

C. Participation by Public Hearing

As shown in Table 3, total hearing participation varied by location across the five regions, which included both in-person and online participants.

Table 3. Hearing participation by location and type: in-person or online

Hearing Location	Total number of participants	In-person participants	Online participants
Hearing 1: The Pennsylvania State University - University Park	86	19	67
Hearing 2: Luzerne County Community College	100	34	66
Hearing 3: St. Joseph's University	161	53	107
Hearing 4: Community College of Allegheny County	165	65	100
Hearing 5: Pennsylvania Western University - Edinboro	168	80	88
TOTAL	680	251	428

4. Summary of Stakeholder Feedback

All feedback obtained via public hearing, survey, and small group meetings was reviewed and summarized. Through this process the following themes were identified, and are organized by draft strategic plan goals below:

Goal 1- Increase Postsecondary Credential Attainment

- *Strategies to increase coordination across sectors to support student success:*
  - Improve coordination across agencies and institutions to streamline support services
  - Develop shared systems for data, advising, transfer, and credit articulation
  - Provide incentives and support stronger coordination for institutions to enter articulation agreements

- *Strategies to provide financial support and credit for prior learning:*
  - Lower costs and increase attainment for all learners, especially through increased state funding
  - Award credit for prior learning and career experience

- *Strategies to improve student support services and infrastructure:*
  - Invest in broadband access and device provision, especially in rural and low-income areas
  - Increase the availability of wraparound supports such as childcare, transportation, housing, mental health, and services to address food insecurity
  - Offer evening, weekend, asynchronous, and online/hybrid classes tailored to non-traditional students (e.g., caregivers, working adults, etc.), particularly returning students with some college and no credential

- *Strategies to improve perceptions regarding the value of postsecondary education:*
  - Foster a college-going culture in all K-12 schools through information sharing ecosystems, particularly in rural and under-resourced districts
  - Provide transparent return on investment metrics showing costs vs. salary and employment prospects

Goal 2 - Ensure Affordable Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials

- *Strategies to increase affordability based on the needs of student subgroups:*
  - Increase access to financial aid and support for low- and middle-income students
  - Use data to guide targeted affordability interventions (e.g., near-completers, high-debt programs)
  - Develop near-completion grants for returning students to earn a credential

- *Strategies to provide low- or no-cost postsecondary education and career training:*
  - Provide free community college, with an emphasis on majors in high-demand fields (the definition of high-demand fields varied by region in the state)
  - Advocate for tuition freezes, caps, or reductions at PASSHE institutions and community colleges
  - Incentivize employer-paid tuition and training for in-demand credentials
  - Offer financial incentives like loan forgiveness to those who work in underserved sectors

- o   Eliminate out-of-county surcharges for students attending community colleges
- o   Expand dual enrollment programs for high school students that are low- or no-cost by creating strategic K-12 and postsecondary partnerships for dual enrollment
- o   Expand financial aid for short-term and non-credit credentials

- *Strategies to reduce non-tuition costs:*
  - o   Provide support for non-tuition expenses like transportation, food, childcare, and technology
  - o   Offer wraparound services at community colleges to address basic needs that create barriers to student success

- *Strategies to educate students and families about costs and financial aid opportunities:*
  - o   Broaden, amplify, and clarify the definition of "cost" to include opportunity costs and living expenses
  - o   Increase financial aid awareness and literacy in K-12 by creating simple, centralized portals for families and students to understand aid options

Goal 3 - Support the Economic Development Needs of the Commonwealth

Strategies to increase collaboration and partnerships across stakeholder groups:
  - o   Increase connection and collaboration between and within the postsecondary sector, government, and labor/industry, including local workforce development boards
  - o   Encourage partnerships between postsecondary institutions and employers

- *Strategies to make sure that educational programs meet workforce and employment needs:*
  - o   Ensure that educational programs align with high demand workforce needs regionally and statewide, including CTE/trade fields
  - o   Accelerate pathways to high demand credentials

- *Strategies to promote and leverage the strengths of and opportunities in the Commonwealth:*
  - o   Promote and support Pennsylvania's research and innovation infrastructure
  - o   Actively recruit and retain college graduates in Pennsylvania
  - o   Improve the availability and use of actionable data and information on education, workforce, and employment needs
  - o   Promote Pennsylvania's workforce, educational resources and economy, as well as the value of higher education

Goal 4 - Support the Workforce Development Needs of the Commonwealth

- *Strategies to expand postsecondary educational opportunities and pathways:*
  - o   Expand opportunities for a postsecondary education in areas with limited access
  - o   Offer accessible and accelerated pathways for adult learners, including ESL courses
  - o   Include instruction on developing students' soft skills for the workplace

- *Strategies to expand employment and work-related opportunities:*
  - o   Incentivize employers to invest in employee training programs
  - o   Incentivize the development of paid and/or credit-bearing apprenticeships, internships, and other experiential learning opportunities that are aligned with related state requirements

- o Provide opportunities for students to earn credentials in high demand fields while on the job
- o Encourage incentives or guarantees of employment from business and industry
- o Encourage entrepreneurship

- *Strategies to increase career exploration and planning*
  - o Provide clear and detailed career pathway maps
  - o Expand programs that build employment skills and offer career exploration and guidance

Goal 5: Ensure Accountability and Efficient Use of State Funds

Strategies to improve data infrastructure:

- o Improve data transparency by creating a centralized data system and publicly available statewide dashboard that reports key data on postsecondary outcomes
- o Remove barriers for data sharing
- o Develop a common set of metrics to measure the success of postsecondary institutions and hold institutions accountable that fully capture the impact of an institution, including the experiences of non-traditional students
- o Ensure data collection requirements are not placing additional financial burdens on institutions
- o Implement performance-based funding across publicly funded sectors that incentivizes institutions to increase degree and credential completion

- *Strategies to incorporate more effectiveness for institutional spending and programming:*
  - o Promote cross-institutional collaboration to reduce redundancy and administrative costs
  - o Identify expenses that can be shared across institutions to cut costs
  - o Create more efficiencies within programs and administrative roles at individual institutions
  - o Identify and invest in more efficient technology
  - o Provide necessary training to faculty/staff for accountability reporting and efficient use of funds
  - o Merge colleges when necessary but ensure students continue to have access to programs

- *Strategies to better determine institutional needs and provide adequate funding:*
  - o Identify institutions with higher need or inadequate funding and provide more funding to institutions to those institutions and for evidence-based programs that prepare workers for in-demand careers
  - o Provide clear guidelines on how the state should allocate funds

- *Strategies to increase access to high-quality programs that meet student and workforce needs:*
  - o Expand community colleges, rural colleges, trade schools, and low-cost non-degree offerings
  - o Encourage proactive planning to adapt to changing student and workforce needs

Goal 6: Strengthen the Fiscal Health and Stability of the Higher Education Sector

Strategies to generate new funding sources or revenue:

- o Generate funds through donations or other alternative funding streams
- o Expand recruitment efforts to attract more out-of-state and international students
- o Expand program offerings to include more virtual options and programs offered year-round

- *Strategies to provide financial planning support:*

- o Develop a best practices toolkit to share successful fiscal strategies with postsecondary institutions
- o Provide technical assistance to postsecondary institutions on financial management, including planning for mergers

- *Strategies to reduce unnecessary expenses:*
  - o Reduce reliance on loans to support institutional operations
  - o Reduce or consolidate institutional reporting requirements and significant financial burdens
  - o Encourage cost sharing and resource sharing across institutions
  - o Encourage collaboration among institutions and workforce partners to develop efficiencies
  - o Review and evaluate expenses to cut unnecessary costs

- *Strategies to stabilize and increase targeted funding:*
  - o Strengthen advocacy efforts to increase overall postsecondary funding
  - o Stabilize funding for community colleges, rural institutions, and dual enrollment programs
  - o Provide additional funding to struggling institutions to help address their challenges
  - o Allocate resources and prioritize funding to effective and successful institutions and programs
  - o Provide incentives to institutions to better serve students and pilot new programs or leverage performance-based funding approaches

5. Conclusion and Next Steps

Thanks to the strong cross-state and sector engagement of diverse stakeholders, the Pennsylvania State Board of Higher Education is better informed, focused and inspired to advance the ambitious draft goals for this inaugural strategic plan. The Board has incorporated stakeholder feedback into a draft strategic plan, which will be shared shortly with the public for further engagement and public comment.