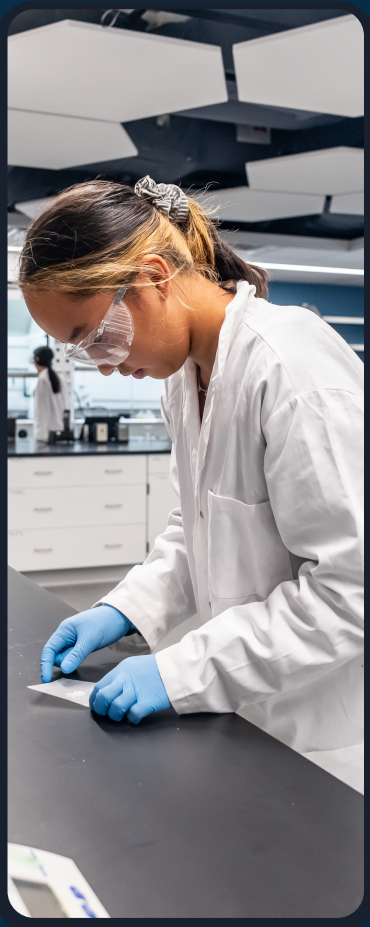











Driving a *Prosperous* Pennsylvania

A Statewide Agenda for Higher Education





February 2026

A Multi-Year Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Pennsylvania

Prepared by the Pennsylvania State Board of Higher Education
pa.gov/sbhe | 607 South Drive Harrisburg, PA 17120

Pennsylvania
State Board of Higher Education

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Mission Statement

The purpose of the Pennsylvania State Board of Higher Education is to provide direction, coordination, and support to ensure that institutions of higher education fully meet the workforce and economic development needs of this Commonwealth, and that all residents of this Commonwealth have access to affordable, world-class postsecondary education.

Letter From the Chair

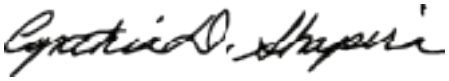
The Governor and the General Assembly established the State Board of Higher Education (SBHE) in July 2024 through bipartisan legislation. The purpose of this historic law is to unite Pennsylvania's public and private postsecondary institutions behind a common mission: To provide direction, coordination, and support to ensure that institutions of higher education fully meet the workforce and economic development needs of this Commonwealth and ensure that all residents of this Commonwealth have access to affordable, world-class postsecondary education. As a coordinating entity, the State Board of Higher Education is charged with leading data- and stakeholder-informed planning and providing clear and consistent guidance and recommendations to support and coordinate the work of each higher education sector while taking into account the varying missions and governing authorities of each.

By design, the SBHE brings an important and broad range of perspectives to our work, with members representing business, K-12 and higher education leadership, the legislature, state agencies, labor, and college staff, faculty, and students. Together, we are tasked with charting a course for Pennsylvania's higher education sector based on a careful review of best ideas, best data, and best practices and to work collaboratively with all stakeholders to meet these goals. The SBHE, committed to its charge, has been working consistently and transparently since its first public meeting in September 2024.

Now it is my honor to present the Board's inaugural Strategic Plan: *Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania*, aimed at unlocking our immense opportunities to take Pennsylvania to the top in economic and workforce development. Building on the rich variety and extraordinary contributions of our higher education sector, this 10-year plan establishes six clear, measurable goals and related strategies designed to tackle our most pressing challenges. The plan will strengthen partnerships, break down silos, and enable effective reinvestment in the sector. Working together, we will propel higher education's collective educational, research and workforce might to expand opportunity for all Pennsylvanians and help secure the Commonwealth's place as a first-rate hub of learning, entrepreneurship, innovation, and family-sustaining jobs.

These goals and strategies — flexible enough to adjust to emerging trends and opportunities — were not created in isolation. They were informed by robust input obtained during our statewide stakeholder engagement process, during which a broad swath of over 1,200 Pennsylvanians told us about their experiences with and aspirations for higher education. The public input we received far exceeded our expectations in terms of both quality and quantity, clearly demonstrating that the mission put forth in this legislation and the SBHE's work to fulfill it is vital.

We all have a stake in the success of this strategic plan; this plan belongs to all of us in Pennsylvania. As we execute on this plan, I am confident that we will succeed together.



Dr. Cynthia Shapira
Chair, State Board of Higher Education

A strong postsecondary education sector is the keystone to prosperity. Colleges and universities deliver the talent that fuels our economy, provide a pathway to opportunity for our residents, and contribute in countless ways to the quality of life in communities throughout the Commonwealth. Across the nation, the most robust economies and the highest quality of life are inextricably linked to a strong and effective higher education sector that provides clear and affordable pathways to world-class postsecondary credentials, fulfills our workforce needs, and plays a central role in our economic development efforts.

In spite of the excellence and rich diversity of our colleges and universities, Pennsylvania's higher education sector sits at a critical juncture. Higher education faces numerous challenges,ranging from declining demographics[1], lagging investments in institutions and financial aid[2], uneven distribution of higher education options across the Commonwealth, and the absence of a clear and unified direction or goals. Multiple comparative state-level analyses published by sources such as U.S. News and World Report[3], the Institute for College Access and Success[4], and the State Higher Education Executive Officers[5], place Pennsylvania at or near the bottom in terms of affordability, attainment, and state investment per capita. Adding to these challenges are a large and growing postsecondary workforce credential gap[6], and a range of closures and mergers[7] that threaten to reduce access to postsecondary education.

Pennsylvania cannot prosper without a higher education sector that aligns to the needs of the Commonwealth and has the resources, direction, and support to meet those needs. At this time, we must ask the question:

How will we work together to build on the extraordinary strength of our colleges and universities to chart a new chapter for higher education that effectively positions it as a primary engine of economic prosperity and quality of life in Pennsylvania?

The State Board of Higher Education's inaugural strategic plan for higher education—*Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania: A Statewide Agenda for Higher Education*—is our answer to this question. Led by the Board's Strategic Planning Committee (See Appendix 2) and informed by dynamic public input, strong analytics, and evidence-based best practices gleaned from leading states across the nation, the strategic plan charts a clear and practical path that builds on the extraordinary breadth and strength of our colleges and universities and calls on partners from across the Commonwealth to work together to meet six foundational goals. By enacting a range of strategies that acknowledge regional differences and are designed to strengthen and coordinate each element of the sector, while taking into account varying governance structures and missions of its sector, Pennsylvania can make steady progress in increasing attainment and affordability, meeting the economic and workforce demands of the Commonwealth, stabilizing and supporting the sector, and providing the transparency and accountability that Pennsylvanians need.

Development of

Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania:

Powered by Robust Public Input

Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania is grounded in deep and varied feedback from individuals and sectors with a vested interest in a strong higher education ecosystem. In keeping with the letter and spirit of the enabling legislation, the Board engaged in two rounds of robust feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. First, over the course of several months in the first half of 2025, we sought input on how to best meet strategic plan goals from higher education leaders across all sectors, K-12 leaders and counselors, high school and college students, college faculty and union members, economic and workforce development leaders, and postsecondary advocacy groups. We conducted five regional hearings, accessible in-person and online, to better understand how local contexts and concerns should factor into goals and strategies. We incorporated suggestions from a statewide online survey, and we gathered targeted feedback from smaller gatherings of stakeholders to ensure a full understanding of their perspectives and suggestions. After incorporating this feedback into a draft of the plan that was introduced to the public in January 2026, the Board once again sought broad feedback to further strengthen the plan before its formal adoption in February 2026.

All told, more than 1,300 individuals and 54 organizations and groups representing a broad range of local, state, and national stakeholders provided perspectives and ideas for the future of higher education in Pennsylvania. This plan benefits enormously from the collective wisdom of those who contributed to this process. We thank you for your support, and we look forward to continued collaboration as we implement the plan.

More detail about our stakeholder engagement process can be found in Appendix 3.

Strategic Plan Goals

Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania: A Statewide Agenda for Higher Education **is anchored by six foundational goals which, when taken together, will deliver a stronger, more effective higher education sector that creates opportunity for Pennsylvanians and drives prosperity in our communities**

1. Increase Postsecondary Credential Attainment

2. Ensure Affordable Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials

3. Support the Economic Development Needs of the Commonwealth

4. Support the Workforce Development Needs of the Commonwealth

5. Ensure Accountability and Efficient, Effective Use of State Funds

6. Strengthen the Fiscal Health and Stability of the Higher Education Sector

Goal 1: Increase Postsecondary Credential Attainment

Postsecondary credentials provide a gateway to prosperity for Pennsylvania families and businesses. Currently, 65 percent of jobs require some type of postsecondary credential — whether a short-term certificate, an industry-recognized credential, or traditional two- or four-year degrees.[8] *Increasing the number and percentage of Pennsylvanians with postsecondary credentials will expand opportunity and fuel the economy.*

How This Benefits Pennsylvania >

1. **Expanded Postsecondary Enrollment:** The percentage of high school students enrolling in higher education one year post graduation will grow.

2. **Improved Retention and Progress:** Increases in the percentages of first-time, full-time students returning for their second year and, of those, earning at least 60 credits.

3. **Higher Overall Attainment:** The number and percentage of students completing a postsecondary credential within 150% of normal time will rise.

4. **Higher Adult Attainment:** Increases in the number and percentage of adults, including those with some college and no degree, who complete a postsecondary credential.

How We Get it Done >

Communicate the Value of Postsecondary Education to Students, Families, Communities, and Employers

Showing the direct connection between postsecondary credentials and good-paying jobs and quality of life will contribute to reversing enrollment declines.

- ✓ *Execute strategic communications plan that effectively relays the benefits of postsecondary education for individuals, communities, and employers.*
- ✓ *Establish web-based, interactive data dashboards displaying the connection between specific credentials, employment and outcomes, including how specific credentials lead to specific jobs and wages*

Strengthen Pathways from High School to Postsecondary Education

Strong, clear pathways from high school to college can substantially increase college access and attainment, especially for students who may not perceive postsecondary education as a viable option.

- ✓ *Facilitate expansion of dual credit funding with an emphasis on underserved students and accumulating credits towards workforce-relevant credentials.*
- ✓ *Facilitate development of statewide "guided pathways" that begin in high school and continue through to postsecondary credentials*
- ✓ *Facilitate expansion of enrollment in career and technical education (CTE) and non-CTE programs aligned with high value credentials.*
- ✓ *Facilitate expansion of dual credit enrollment and the number of postsecondary credits obtained upon high school graduation.*
- ✓ *Ensure that dual credit opportunities align with the rigor of college courses and are fully recognized at all postsecondary institutions.*
- ✓ *Work with K-12 sector to better align graduation requirements with college readiness to reduce the need for remediation.*

Sustain and Expand Access to Full Complement of Postsecondary Education Options

Working together, our higher education sector can ensure that all regions of the Commonwealth provide a full range of higher education opportunities.

- ✓ *Conduct regional analyses to determine the degree to which residents have access to a full complement of postsecondary education options.*
- ✓ *Working with regional higher education and statewide partners, create a strategy for ensuring that each region of Pennsylvania has access to a full complement of postsecondary options.*

Address Barriers to Retention and Attainment

Ensuring that all students have the supports and resources needed to complete their credentials will increase attainment.

- ✓ *Conduct regional analyses to identify the largest structural barriers to postsecondary retention and attainment with a focus on transportation, internet access, and availability of childcare.*
- ✓ *Identify research-based best practices aligned to supporting and retaining students through to credential attainment.*
- ✓ *Recommend strategies and seek resources necessary to overcome identified barriers.*
- ✓ *Facilitate the development of partnerships with community based organizations to assist students in accessing resources and guidance.*
- ✓ *Determine the resources and resource levels needed to support collegiate basic needs related to college access.*

Increase Responsible Investment in Higher Education

Steadily increased resources, invested responsibly with clear ties to critical outcomes, will improve attainment and improve our return on investment.

- ✓ *Conduct analyses and consult postsecondary fiscal policy experts to identify reinvestment strategies aligned to increasing postsecondary attainment.*
- ✓ *Develop a responsible, transparent plan for reinvesting in postsecondary education.*
- ✓ *Delineate linkage between reinvestment dollars and attainment and other critical state outcomes.*

Enact Policies to Increase Postsecondary Attainment of Adult Students

Policies and resources that support adult college students will improve attainment for the 1.1 million adult Pennsylvanians who started but did not finish college and make college-going possible for millions more working adults.[9]

- ✓ *Identify the most effective strategies enacted in other states to increase the attainment levels of adult students.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies and resources necessary to increase adult postsecondary attainment, factoring in needs of specific populations, such as returning students, veterans, working adults, English language learners, criminal justice involved/ formerly incarcerated, etc.*

Goal 2: Ensure Affordable Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials

While college credentials provide opportunities to meet life and career goals, Pennsylvania's higher education sector is among the most expensive in the nation. Student debt averages more than $40,000 upon graduation.[10] *Research shows that across the country, high cost and ensuing debt fears are reducing enrollment and attainment.*[11]

How This Benefits Pennsylvania >

1. **Decrease in the Average Net Price of Postsecondary Credentials for PA Learners:** Decreases in the average net price for total cost of attendance of a postsecondary credential from shorter term to degree and graduate level for each sector of Pennsylvania.

2. **Decrease in the Average Net Price as Percentage of Income:** Average net price of obtaining postsecondary credentials inclusive of total cost of attendance for different income quintiles will drop.

3. **Decrease in the Average Student Debt at Graduation/Credential Attainment:** Measurable drops in debt level for students upon completion of their credential across all sectors.

4. **Stronger Return on Investment for Credential Holders:** Achieve positive returns on investment (ROI)[12] for credential holders across all sectors.

How We Get it Done >

Clearly Communicate the Costs of Postsecondary Pathways in Pennsylvania

Facilitate prospective students' understanding of costs related to the variety of higher education options.

- ✓ *Compile and make available comprehensive information regarding college costs and all types of available financial aid, and net cost of college attendance.*
- ✓ *Establish reliable estimates of non-tuition costs, such as course materials, housing, childcare, transportation and related expenses .*
- ✓ *Create web-based tools that allow students and families to compare affordability options and make informed decisions.*

Strengthen Policies to Increase Affordability via K-16 Stackable Credentials

Expanding access to stackable learning and credentials lets students build on earned credits, save time and money, and reach career goals.

- ✓ *Facilitate the expansion of dual credit funding and enrollment with an emphasis on underserved students and accumulating credits towards workforce-relevant credentials.*
- ✓ *Facilitate the expansion of enrollment in CTE aligned with workforce-ready credentials and the number of postsecondary credits obtained upon high school graduation.*
- ✓ *Facilitate the expansion of transfer policies, including credit for short-term and micro-credentials, and other postsecondary learning.*

Maximize Affordability and Reduce Student Debt

Expanding and adopting programs proven to improve college affordability will advance credential completion and decrease debt for Pennsylvanians.

- ✓ *Conduct analysis to assess the effectiveness of existing state aid programs in maximizing affordability and reducing student debt for different economic brackets.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies to increase financial aid and reduce student debt for Pennsylvanians with the greatest needs.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies to broaden access to and expand resources for state work study and other work-based learning connected to postsecondary credits.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies and resources needed to increase access to open educational resources and other means to mitigate high costs of required course materials.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies to expand financial aid and forgive debt for in-demand, high-quality credentials.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies and resources needed to increase FAFSA and State Grant form completion.*
- ✓ *Work collaboratively with PA Department of Labor & Industry, PDE and other stakeholders to effectively deploy Workforce Pell grants.*

- *Explore options to eliminate or reduce additional tuition paid by community college students who do not reside in sponsoring school districts or counties.*

- *Facilitate the expansion of higher education apprenticeship pathways for high demand, high value career fields and participation in other paid work experiences and skills building (e.g., internships, co-ops, practica, service learning, utilizing 'research-innovation' assets as worksites, etc).*

Goal 3: Support the Economic Development Needs of the Commonwealth

Pennsylvania's rich, diverse array of colleges and universities are positioned well to develop the talent and foster the innovation we need to be a top state in economic development. To meet this goal, we need to strengthen the engagement of higher education in regional and statewide economic development efforts and provide incentives to develop — and retain — the benefits of ingenuity and hard work in Pennsylvania.

How This Benefits Pennsylvania >

1. Aligned with the 10-year Pennsylvania Economic Development Strategic Plan[13] released in 2024, Pennsylvania's higher education sector will play a critical role in Pennsylvania's economic development strategy.

2. Pennsylvania's higher education sector will contribute measurably to the talent and innovation needed to propel the Commonwealth to one of the best economic development environments in the country.

How We Get it Done >

Unlock and Communicate Higher Education's Full Potential to Contribute to State, Regional, and Local Economic Development Ecosystems

With support for research, talent pipelines, and entrepreneurial development, every Pennsylvania college and university has a role to play in shaping and contributing to regional strategies for economic growth, fostering innovation ecosystems, and aligning education offerings with the needs of emerging and high-growth sectors.

- ✓ *Ensure higher education is included in statewide, cross-agency strategic efforts to advance economic development.*
- ✓ *Strengthen and expand existing regional economic development partnerships by ensuring strong postsecondary engagement.*
- ✓ *Recommend strategies and incentives for aligning postsecondary institutional priorities with regional and statewide economic development goals.*
- ✓ *Recommend strategic investment and policy to support higher education's role in economic development efforts.*
- ✓ *Communicate the value of higher education to the economic well-being of communities and the Commonwealth.*

Drive Research and Innovation in the Postsecondary Sector

Maximizing the ability of the higher education sector to convert research into real-world commercial products and services will fuel innovation and enhance the long-term economic well-being of Pennsylvania.

- ✓ *Recommend policies, resources, and incentives to support the commercialization and transfer of R&D in Pennsylvania.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies and incentives to retain new industry and innovation in Pennsylvania.*

Support Research-Intensive Universities in Leading Research, Innovation, and Economic Development

Propel a top-tier research and innovation environment by fostering the unique assets of Pennsylvania's research-intensive universities.

- ✓ *Establish and support strategic partnerships to maximize the impact of research universities in research, innovation and economic development.*
- ✓ *Recommend the creation of incentives for innovation and collaborative approaches to increasing overall research and development dollars.*

Recruit, Educate, and Retain World-Class Talent

Whether hailing from Pennsylvania or traveling from other states or countries, students educated in our colleges and universities provide a talent pool that is invaluable to our economic and workforce development goals.

- ✓ *Recommend policies and resources to attract out-of-state students to Pennsylvania's postsecondary institutions and retain them in Pennsylvania, post graduation.*
- ✓ *Recommend policy and resources to create and expand Pennsylvania work-based opportunities for those pursuing postsecondary credentials.*
- ✓ *Recommend policies and resources to help industry and employers, including small businesses, offer and sustain work-based opportunities to build the talent needed for today and to grow and compete in tomorrow's economy.*

- *Recommend policies and resources to expand and strengthen employer involvement and partnerships with higher education institutions to co-design training and learning experiences that result in the hiring and retention of students in Pennsylvania.*

Goal 4: Support the Workforce Development Needs of the Commonwealth

The number of postsecondary-level skilled Pennsylvanians is not keeping up with employer demand. If left unaddressed, by 2032 the gap will grow to over 200,000. These postsecondary workforce credential gaps exist in all regions of the Commonwealth, and employers seek specific skills, expertise, and the capacity to innovate and think critically. Workers will need all 3 to succeed in the workforce of today and in the future. Working together to collaborate across sectors at regional and state levels, we can strategically align postsecondary offerings and resources with good Pennsylvania-based jobs and careers- strengthening our economy and enabling Pennsylvanians to live, work and thrive in the communities they love. Alignment of skills, capacity and credentials with good jobs will ensure quality wages, the ability to stay competitive throughout a lifetime of work, and the opportunity for economic mobility.

How This Benefits Pennsylvania >

1. **Meet Pennsylvania's Workforce Needs:** The postsecondary workforce credential gap will substantially narrow or be eliminated statewide and in every region.

2. **Increase the Number of Pennsylvanians with Credentials of Value [16] :** The number and percentage of Pennsylvanians with credentials in high demand that yield good wages and opportunities for economic mobility will increase.

3. **Increased Employment in High-Demand, High-Value Careers:** The number and percentage of Pennsylvanians employed in jobs that yield quality wages and provide an opportunity for economic mobility will increase.

4. **Increased Alignment between Postsecondary Programs and High-Demand, High-Value Careers:** The percentage of academic and non-credit programs aligned to high-demand and high-value careers, validated by employers or industry advisory groups will increase.

How We Get it Done >

Utilize and Strengthen Regional Cross-Sector Partnerships to Encourage Collaborative Approaches to Meeting Needs in High-Demand, High-Value Career Fields

Leverage regional workforce initiatives to enhance the coordination, responsiveness, and impact of higher education in meeting unique and critical workforce needs in their communities, regions, and statewide.

- *Strengthen and expand existing regional workforce development partnerships by ensuring strong postsecondary and employer collaboration in identifying credentials of value.*
- *Recommend policies and resources that expand postsecondary opportunities aligned to workforce needs in rural communities.*
- *Ensure that regional variations—in particular, the specific needs of rural and urban communities—are understood and factored into workforce development strategies.*

Align Workforce Development Resources with Postsecondary Credentials of Value

Effectively aligning credentials of value with workforce critical needs requires a clear understanding of how to navigate complex, overlapping programs and leverage available workforce development resources.

- *Utilize labor market information, cross-sector partnerships and employer engagement to identify credentials of value needed in each region and statewide.*
- *Assess and streamline the deployment of existing or new resources to expand opportunities for students (e.g. adults, working professionals, justice-involved individuals and modern learners) to earn a credential of value.*
- *Support the development of shared resources amongst higher education institutions and scale best practices.*
- *Monitor current trends impacting the intersection of work and higher education, including technological advancements and labor market trends.*

Provide Transparent Information Regarding Credential Pathways, Available Jobs, and Academic Programs at Regional and State Levels

To make informed choices aligned with career goals, current and prospective students and their families need to understand which postsecondary programs and credentials map to high-demand, high-value regional and statewide employment fields.

- *Create web-based interactive tools that can be used to identify local and regional employment opportunities and the credential programs aligned to them.*

- *Develop information and materials that communicate the alignment of higher education and workforce development including employer hiring and retention, career advancement, and innovative approaches in governance, design, and delivery of postsecondary education.*[17]

Increase Student Access to Quality Paid Work Experiences and Skill-Building Opportunities

To prepare students for meaningful careers, the higher education setting must embed paid, real-world experiences as a default expectation in higher education settings. Experiences and opportunities must build essential skill sets, competencies, and unlock opportunities that align with both student goals and the evolving landscape of high-demand, high-value careers.

- *Strengthen existing and develop new partnerships among postsecondary institutions, employers, labor organizations and workforce systems to expand opportunities for participation in paid work experiences and skills building (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, co-ops, practica, service learning, utilizing 'research-innovation' assets as worksites, etc).*
- *Recommend policies and resources necessary to support and incentivize industry partnerships.*

Unlock Institutional Flexibility through Incentives that Allow Timely Delivery of Workforce Critical Education and Training

To keep pace with changing workforce needs, Pennsylvania must implement best-in-class approaches to support high-quality education and training solutions without sacrificing academic rigor.

- *Identify and recommend policy and resource opportunities to implement proof of concepts and best practices to scale the delivery of workforce education and training aligned to employer demand.*
- *Collaborate with key stakeholders, including K-12 and postsecondary institutions, employers, local workforce development boards, labor organizations, and industry representatives, across Pennsylvania to develop and execute Workforce Pell strategies aligned with high-demand, high-value short-term credentials.*

Goal 5: Ensure Accountability and Efficient, Effective Use of State Funds

Our higher education sector serves as a primary pathway to economic mobility for students, and enriches our communities and state economically and socially. Despite this, everyday Pennsylvanians know too little about how and to what end our postsecondary institutions utilize state dollars. Commonwealth residents need to know that their tax dollars are being used efficiently and effectively by higher education institutions.

Higher education effectiveness refers to the ability of postsecondary institutions to achieve goals and objectives aligned to institutional and statewide missions. These could include providing high quality academic programming, strong student outcomes, or meeting critical postsecondary workforce credential needs.

Higher education efficiency refers to the ability of institutions to achieve goals and objectives while containing the amount of fiscal or human resources needed to do so.

How This Benefits Pennsylvania >

1. **Substantially Increase Transparency**: Across a broad range of higher education metrics and information, greater emphasis will be placed on transparency and providing tools for Pennsylvanians to explore how higher education institutions and sectors are performing against key indicators.

2. **Centralized Evidence of Efficiencies:** Regularly update a publicly available repository of examples that demonstrate how state resources are supporting critical state and regional goals in efficient and effective ways.

3. **Increased Levels of Public Trust in Higher Education:** Based on indicators derived from surveys and focus groups, Pennsylvanians' understanding of and confidence in higher education's capacity to contribute to the public good will increase.

How We Get it Done >

Incentivize Institutions to Align to Critical State Goals

Directing state resources towards important outcomes that align with state and institutional priorities provides both transparency and accountability.

- ✓ *Identify and recommend best-in-class strategies for aligning state resources to critical student- and institutional-level goals.*

- *Identify and recommend strategies to better define sector-specific missions and align efforts and resources to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and reduce unnecessary duplication.*
- *Identify and recommend strategies to ensure the appropriate balance between efficiency, effectiveness, and serving the needs of the Commonwealth.*
- *Conduct analysis of infrastructure improvements needed to achieve critical state goals and recommend necessary resource allocation.*

Collect, Compile, and Centralize Existing Data to Increase Transparency in Higher Education

Ensuring that Pennsylvanians have access to a wide range of information about the higher education sector is a vital element of transparency.

- *Develop template of data elements needed to provide transparency and illustrate higher education contributions.*
- *Utilize already-existing state, federal, and national data to minimize burden on higher education institutions.*
- *Develop a repository of examples of how institutions and sectors are effectively using state funds to advance state and regional goals.*

Provide Web-Based Dashboards and Interactive Tables Allowing Easy Access to and Analysis of Data

Providing access to data and information via easy-to-use web-based analysis tools and interactive graphics to display trends and ROI calculations across all sectors and credential types, which promote transparency and increase public trust in higher education.

- *Engage key stakeholders regularly in the development of the data dashboard.*
- *Update data dashboards annually.*

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

The demographic and economic headwinds facing higher education in Pennsylvania are unprecedented. For the overall financial health of the sector, we must proactively and collaboratively find efficiencies and cost savings without sacrificing quality. When institutions close or merge, strategies to retain access to higher education and minimize the negative impact on students and communities are critical. Working together, we can find pathways to fiscal health and stability that will ensure access to high-quality postsecondary education across Pennsylvania.

How This Benefits Pennsylvania >

1. **Reduction in Fiscal Instability and Sudden Closures:** Institutions experiencing fiscal instability will navigate effectively, avoiding sudden closures, via the use of materials and expertise provided by the SBHE.

2. **Successful Mergers/Closures:** Closures and mergers will occur in transparent and predictable ways, with strategies in place to minimize negative effects on students, staff, and communities.

3. **Retain Access to a Full Range of Postsecondary Options in Affected Communities:** Cross-sector collaborations in regions affected by closures will result in actions needed to retain access to a full range of postsecondary education.

How We Get it Done >

Identify and Promote Efficient and Effective Cost-Saving Strategies

Efficiencies that do not negatively affect educational quality are possible through strategic collaboration, and incentives to adopt such strategies would multiply their impact.

- ✓ *Identify and disseminate best practices to promote efficiency and cost-savings without sacrificing educational quality (e.g., shared back-office services; institutional partnerships).*
- ✓ *Support and encourage institutions to utilize cost-saving strategies via collaboration or other mechanisms.*

Develop Tools, Resources, and Expertise to Assist Institutions Experiencing Fiscal Instability

As colleges and universities face economic challenges, the Commonwealth can make a range of assistance available to help ensure that decisions and actions are informed by robust analysis and supported by necessary expertise.

- ✓ *Identify state-of-the-art predictive analytics and estimation tools for institutions exploring solutions to fiscal instability and make available on SBHE website.*
- ✓ *Create an advisory group to assist on such issues.*

Develop Tools, Resources, and Expertise to Assist Institutions in Exploring Mergers and Closures

If institutions decide to close or merge, tools and expertise to assist in this process will help maximize savings, retain access to critical academic programming, and mitigate negative effects on students and communities.

- ✓ *Identify state-of-the-art tools and materials for institutions exploring mergers and closures and make available on SBHE website.*
- ✓ *Create an advisory group to assist on such issues.*
- ✓ *Develop and create incentives and guidelines for mergers and closures to help ensure that financial obligations and student needs are met.*
- ✓ *Develop standards for "teach out" plans to ensure students can complete their credentials if a closure or merger occurs.*
- ✓ *Develop guidelines for a comprehensive analysis of the impact of closures or mergers on affected communities and regions.*

Support Efforts to Retain and Expand Access to Postsecondary Education in Communities Affected by Closures and Mergers

By bringing together relevant state and regional stakeholders during the closure and merger process, negative educational impacts can be mitigated and access to a full range of postsecondary options aligned with workforce needs can be retained or expanded.

- ✓ *Create an advisory group comprised of state-, regional-, and institutional-level members to determine how best to retain access to postsecondary education in affected communities.*
- ✓ *Collect and analyze data relevant to assess the impact of a closure and identify strategies to minimize effects in affected communities.*

Next Steps:

Robust Implementation and Tracking Progress

The State Board of Higher Education has laid out an ambitious yet commonsense agenda designed to position our higher education sector as a primary engine of prosperity and well-being in the Commonwealth. The stakes are high, but our path is clear. Working together, we can achieve the goals that drive this plan. In doing so, we can ensure that Pennsylvania's colleges and universities will increase their capacity to contribute substantially to a first-rate economy and quality of life.

The higher education sector alone cannot achieve the goals of this strategic plan. Strong, cross-sector collaboration and coordination is a necessary ingredient of long-term success.

For this reason, the deep stakeholder engagement evident in the development of the strategic plan will also be a central element of its implementation. Working closely with its staff, the Board will develop and lead an implementation strategy that is informed by a thorough review of available data and information, and incorporates sustained collaboration with partners from the field that bring critical insight and expertise.

Board committees and cross-sector workgroups focused on each goal will identify and prioritize action steps to ensure strong and unified coordination, as well as identifying the tools that higher education institutions and partners will need to make measurable progress on strategic plan goals.

Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania is designed to be a dynamic document, with enough flexibility to ensure that it continues to function as the unified roadmap needed to chart a bright future for the sector. Higher education is in the midst of substantial disruptive change as well as unpredictable shifts in context. The Board will adjust and refine the strategic plan as necessary to ensure that it is responsive to changes in policy and context at the state or federal levels, and provides the support needed for higher education to fulfill its promise.

The State Board of Higher Education embraces its mission to be accountable and transparent in its work, and to provide clear-cut indicators of how our work is progressing. To that end, we will report annually on progress toward meeting the goals of the strategic plan. Our reports will include quantitative indicators where appropriate, as well as clear descriptions of progress made on other elements of the plan.

Appendices

Appendix 1. 2026 SBHE Members

- **Dr. Cynthia Shapira (Chair)**, Chair, Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education's Board of Governors.
- **Dr. Brenda Allen (Vice Chair)**, President, Lincoln University.
- **Dr. Ann Bieber**, President, Lehigh Carbon Community College.
- **Dr. Christa Heyward**, Student, Delaware County Community College.
- **Ms. Marylouise Esten**, Vice President and Deputy Provost, Temple University.
- **Dr. Kara Laskowski**, Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Shippensburg University. Vice President, Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF).
- **Mr. Kenneth Long**, President, East Stroudsburg University.
- **Dr. Cheryl McConnell**, President, Saint Joseph's University.
- **Dr. Pedro Rivera**, President, Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology.
- **Ms. Andrea Shirk**, President and CEO, Rock Lititz.
- **Dr. Michael Wade Smith**, Senior Vice President and Chief of Staff, Pennsylvania State University.
- **Mr. Michael Warfel**, Vice President of Governmental Affairs, Highmark, Inc.
- **Mr. Kevin Washo**, Senior Vice Chancellor for External Relations, University of Pittsburgh.
- **Ms. Hayley Butler**, Student, Carlow University.
- **Ms. Bobbie Jo Zapor**, Collections Coordinator for Media, Equipment, and Reserve, and Evening Supervisor for the student workforce at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. President of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 763.
- **The Honorable Jay Costa**, Pennsylvania Senate.
- **The Honorable Wayne Langerholc**, Pennsylvania Senate.
- **The Honorable Paul Takac**, Pennsylvania House of Representatives.
- **The Honorable Jesse Topper**, Pennsylvania House of Representatives.
- **The Honorable Carrie Rowe**, Secretary of Education.
- **The Honorable Nancy A. Walker**, Secretary of Labor and Industry.

Special thanks to the following inaugural Board members, all of whom made valuable contributions in the development of the strategic plan prior to their departure:

- **The Honorable Peter Schweyer,** Pennsylvania House of Representatives
- **Mr. Sean Eden,** student, Pennsylvania State University
- **Ms. Skyler Wrubleski,** student, Duquesne University

Appendix 2. 2026 SBHE Strategic Planning Committee Members

- **Dr. Benda Allen**
- **Dr. Cynthia Shapira**
- **Ms. Bobbie Jo Zapor**
- **Ms. Andrea Shirk**
- **Dr. Pedro Rivera**
- **Ms. Marylouise Esten**
- **Secretary Nancy A. Walker**
- **Dr. Michael Wade Smith**
- **Dr. Kara Laskowski**

Appendix 3. Stakeholder Groups Consulted During the Development of *Driving a Prosperous Pennsylvania*

The following is a list of groups and stakeholders that provided valuable feedback in shaping the goals and strategies of the Plan:

- **Partner4Work (formerly Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board)**
- **High school students from South Fayette and West Allegheny School Districts**
- **Community College Presidents**
- **PASSHE Presidents**
- **PASSHE Adult Continuing Education Directors**
- **Pennsylvania State Board of Education**
- **The Pennsylvania Chamber of Commerce: Higher Education Committee**
- **Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association**
- **Lancaster Chamber of Commerce**
- **Project Reconnect Chester**
- **Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education**
- **Faculty members from Pennsylvania Western University**
- **Pennsylvania State Education Association**
- **College students attending Pennsylvania Western University**
- **Southeastern Pennsylvania Consortium for Higher Education**
- **Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable**
- **Team PA**
- **Arcadia University's Bridging the Skills Gap Higher Education/Workforce Development Meeting**
- **Partnerships for Regional Economic Performance**
- **Pennsylvania State Workforce Development Board, Employer Engagement and Industry Partnership Committee**
- **Center for Rural Pennsylvania**
- **Independent College and University Presidents**
- **County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP)**
- **Harrisburg Regional Chamber**
- **Keystone Development Partnership**

- PA National Federation of Independent Business
- PA State Workforce Development Board – Barrier Remediation Committee
- PA Workforce Development Association
- Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency
- Pittsburgh Promise
- Private Licensed School Leaders
- CASE Philadelphia
- Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania
- CareerReady Lancaster
- Chester County Economic Development Council
- City of Philadelphia Mayor's Office of Education
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
- iQ GovSolutions
- JEVS Human Services
- Lancaster County Workforce Development Board
- Lehigh Carbon Community College Board of Trustees
- National Center for Apprenticeship Degrees
- Laborers International Union of North America, Mid-Atlantic
- IBEW Local 375
- Pennsylvania Building and Construction Trades Council
- NWPA Job Connect
- Pennsylvania Commission on Community Colleges
- Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection
- Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE)
- The Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)
- Trellis Strategies
- United Way of Pennsylvania
- Workforce Solutions of North Central PA
- Penn Global, University of Pennsylvania
- Philadelphia Works
- North Central Workforce Development Board
- Pennsylvania Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
- Pennsylvania Student Counselors Association
- Pennsylvania College Admissions Counselors Association

Appendix 4. Definition of Key Terms

Cost of Attendance – *Total education-related costs for students, including stated tuition (commonly referred to as the "sticker price"), both mandatory and optional fees, room and board, books and supplies, and transportation. Cost of attendance is used to calculate financial aid eligibility and amount of aid.*

Net Price – *Remaining cost of attendance after subtracting all grants and scholarships that do not require repayment.*

Credentials of Value – *As defined by the Lumina Foundation (Methodology|Stronger Nation) and adopted by several states, credentials of value are degrees, certificates, and certifications that are in demand, valued by industry and yield an annual salary or wage at least 15% more than the national median salary or wage for a high school graduate after controlling for regional differences.*

Return on Investment - *The net economic value of a postsecondary credential or degree. Typically calculated by comparing wages obtained by an individual with a postsecondary credential with those of a high school graduate, subtracting the full cost of obtaining the credential.*

Quality Wages – *As defined in the Aspen Institute's Job Quality Framework Initiative, quality wages support the economic stability for workers and their families to meet their basic needs. (https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/good-jobs-champions-group/)*

Workforce Critical Education and Training – *Postsecondary training and credentials that are aligned to Workforce Critical Fields. Such postsecondary education maximizes employment, quality wages, and economic mobility.*

K-20W Stackable Credits – *A set of smaller educational credentials that can be accumulated piecemeal and contribute to larger credentials aligned with employment (e.g., undergraduate and advance degrees). They offer students opportunity to progress towards a degree efficiently and at their own pace, and create clear pathways from credentials to employment.*

High-Demand, High-Value Careers – *Career fields or occupations that exhibit labor market demand by Pennsylvania employers or organized labor in a state and/or region, provide quality living wages, offer career advancement or economic mobility, and require some form of postsecondary credential or learning.*

Higher Education Apprenticeship Pathways – *These pathways incorporate apprenticeships into postsecondary education to seamlessly lead to an associate or bachelor's degree, and/or enable participants to receive postsecondary academic credit based on their experience.*

Open Education Resources – *Teaching, learning, and research materials intentionally created and licensed to be free to own, share, and modify. They can substantially reduce the cost of textbooks and other educational materials.*

Return on Investment (ROI) – *The net economic value of a postsecondary credential or degree. Typically calculated by comparing wages obtained by an individual with a postsecondary credential with those of a high school graduate, subtracting the full cost of obtaining the credential.*

Free Application for Federal Financial Aid (FAFSA) – *A federal form that students complete to determine their eligibility for financial aid for college. In Pennsylvania, students must fill out the FAFSA to determine eligibility for most state financial aid programs as well.*

Postsecondary Workforce Credential Gap – *The difference between the postsecondary credentials needed to fill current and future jobs, and the production of these credentials. Can be calculated at the regional and state levels.*

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[2]Ma, Jennifer, Matea Pender, and Meghan Oster (2024). Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2024, New York: College Board; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2025). State Higher Education Finance: FY 2024.

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[4]The Institute for College Access & Success. (2021). Student debt and the class of 2020. https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/classof2020.pdf

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[6]Baker Tilly. (2023). The postsecondary credential gap: A workforce development challenge for Pennsylvania. https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/education/documents/sbhe/pdeworkforcepostsecondarycredentialgapreport.pdf

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[9]Cohen, J., Causey, J., Randolph, B., Holsapple, M., and Shapiro, D. (June 2025), Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes, Annual Progress Report – Academic Year 2023/24, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

[10] The Institute for College Access & Success. (2021). Student debt and the class of 2020. https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/classof2020.pdf

[11] Lumina Foundation & Gallup. (2024). Cost of College: The Price Tag of Higher Education and Its Effect on Enrollment. Lumina Foundation. https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Cost.of_.College.pdf; Mowreader, Ashley.(2024, 29 May). Cost of Higher Education Not Worth It to Students. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2024/05/29/cost-higher-education-not-worth-it-students

[12]We will explore different ways of estimating the return on investment of a postsecondary credential beyond the difference in college graduates' economic outcomes, after controlling for total educational investments by institutions and foregone wages (or "opportunity costs"), compared to those of a high school graduate. This includes accounting for increased tax revenue tied to higher earnings, diminished reliance on state services, and other non-monetary outcomes, such as job security and lifestyle stability.

[13]A Ten-Year Strategic Plan for Economic Development in Pennsylvania, 2024–2033. https://pagetsitdone.com/content/dam/copa-getsitdone/en/documents/economicdevelopmentstrategy-dced_2024_final.pdf

[14]As generally referenced in the Aspen Institute's Job Quality Framework Initiative, quality wages support the economic stability for workers and their families to meet their basic needs. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/good-jobs-champions-group/

[15]Baker Tilly. (2023). The postsecondary credential gap: A workforce development challenge for Pennsylvania. https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/education/documents/sbhe/pdeworkforcepostsecondarycredentialgapreport.pdf

[16]"Credentials of value," as defined by the Lumina Foundation (Methodology | Stronger Nation) and adopted by several states, are defined as degrees, certificates, and certifications that that are in demand and valued by industry and yield an annual salary or wage at least 15% more than the national median salary or wage for a high school graduate after controlling for regional differences.

Refers to legislative mandates regarding financial aid access and program eligibility requirements. Text - H.R.1 - 119th Congress (2025–2026): One Big Beautiful Bill Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress