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The union elephant in PASSHE's room

The 14-school Pennsylvania State System of High Education, or PASSHE, has been beset with many woes over the past dozen years.

There's the tanking enrollment. Then there's a darn-near open acceptance policy for those who do enroll, which does a disservice to those wholly unprepared for college-level studies.

PASSHE also continues to struggle mightily with maintaining its bricks-and-mortar building stock, not to forget a high-level of debt brought about by past imprudent building expansion programs.

Then there's the elephant in the room. Hint: Organized labor doesn't want to hear about this one.

“Senior faculty costs are well above comparison universities nationally and nine of the member schools have per student expenditures above the national comparison average,” notes Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

Indeed, there have been significant cuts to PASSHE employment in the last few years. According to the system's financial statement of June 2022, full-time-equivalent employment (FTE) fell from 11,654 in 2020 to 9,823 in 2022, or 15.7 percent.

That said, FTE faculty fell 11.2 percent from 2015 to 2021, with the preponderance of the decline from 2020 to 2021. While the data are not yet available, it appears, based on the additional 5 percent decrease in total FTE in 2022, faculty also could be further reduced by 5 percent.

Additionally, PASSHE's latest appropriations request to the state Legislature presents a faculty salary comparison with a national sample of comparable universities.

And, it concludes, “According to these data, salaries of junior faculty (instructors and assistant professors) are comparable to those that apply at comparator universities nationally; senior faculty (associate professors and above), representing 52 percent of the System's faculty

complement, are considerably higher than average ranking in the first (top) quartile of faculty salaries at comparator institutions.”

“Indeed,” Haulk says (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No.41*), “the data presented show that professors at PASSHE schools earn, on average, 12.7 percent more (\$113,454 compared to \$100,696) than professors with doctorate degrees in the comparison schools.

“Associate professors at PASSHE earn 11.8 percent more (\$90,788 to \$81,205) than doctorates at comparator institutions,” the Ph.D. economist notes. “Assistant professor and instructor pay is on par with the national comparator institutions.

“Bear in mind,” Haulk stresses, “that all PASSHE faculty are represented by a labor union.”

By the way, that appropriations request document adds the following comment regarding pay:

“Given the wide regional variation in average household income that exists across Pennsylvania, the System will begin benchmarking salaries by role, institution type, and regional population density.”

“The union might have disagreement with that proposal,” Haulk notes.

The bottom line is that PASSHE faces very serious issues of long-term declining enrollment and applications to enroll, very high costs driven by salaries and generous benefit packages.

“Efforts to solve these problems and maintain the best possible education experience for students are made more difficult because 85 percent of employees are unionized, including faculty,” Haulk concludes.

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