

### **PASSHE dealing with difficulties**

**Introduction:** The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) has 10 universities with 14 campus locations that have undergone a drastic decline in enrollment since 2015. Although there has been a minor reversal in the latest couple of years, the prospect of future enrollment is not very good.

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#### *Enrollment issues*

Most PASSHE schools depend heavily on graduates from Pennsylvania high schools as they account for a very high percentage of enrollment. But projections for the next few years indicate a moderately steep decline in high school graduates, creating a major problem for many PASSHE schools. Currently many of these schools already accept 90 to 100 percent of applicants in an attempt to stem the enrollment decline.

Other Pennsylvania colleges and universities will face the same drop off in high school graduates. However, many successful and nationally recognized private schools, such as the University of Pennsylvania and Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), with their very low acceptance rates and very high national rank among universities, have a much broader geographic base for potential enrollees. Several other colleges and universities fall into this category as well.

With PASSHE acceptance rates at several schools already very high, it stands to reason that their academic qualifications cannot be very high. Potential students are no longer required to submit SAT or ACT scores while many are admitted with barely a C-plus average. And with no SAT/ACT score guidance as to college readiness, the C-plus average, depending on the rigor of the course material and instructors' grading practices, provides little guidance about preparedness for college-level work. That, in turn, is a likely predictor of low four- and six-year graduation rates.

The average four-year graduation rate in 2025 across the PASSHE schools was 42 percent. The six-year rate was 56 percent. That means 58 percent of students who enrolled four years earlier did not graduate and 44 percent of students that enrolled six years earlier had yet to graduate. The individual PASSHE schools' graduation rates range

from a four-year rate high of 54 percent at Slippery Rock and 53 percent at West Chester to 38 percent at PennWest and the low teens for Cheyney University.

By comparison, the University of Pennsylvania's four-year graduation rate was 89 percent, CMU's was 81 percent and Penn State's was 72 percent.

### *National and regional university rankings*

Two PASSHE schools were included in [U.S.News'](#) 2026 annual ranking of 436 national universities—schools that were selected by having a full range of studies programs and offering master's and doctorate degrees. West Chester and Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) were included in this category. Of the 436 universities West Chester ranked 242<sup>nd</sup>, close to being in the top half of ranked schools across the country while IUP ranked 329<sup>th</sup>, near the bottom one-fourth of the ranking. The University of Pennsylvania and CMU are the highest ranked Pennsylvania schools at seventh and 20<sup>th</sup> respectively, while Penn State (University Park) ranked 59<sup>th</sup>.

The other PASSHE schools are ranked in the [North region](#) which includes 170 schools in the 11 states from Maryland to Maine. Highest ranked is Slippery Rock at 55<sup>th</sup> which puts it comfortably in the top third of regional universities. Shippensburg placed 84<sup>th</sup>, near the cutoff for being in the top 50 percent of schools. Next highest rank was Millersville at 98<sup>th</sup>, followed by Kutztown at 112<sup>th</sup>, Commonwealth at 121<sup>st</sup> and, finally, East Stroudsburg and PennWest tied at 136<sup>th</sup>. Any school ranked below 114<sup>th</sup> is in the bottom one-third of the schools in the North region.

Meanwhile, Cheyney was ranked in U.S.News' [national liberal](#) arts category which is comprised of 207 schools. Cheyney ranked 183<sup>rd</sup> to 201<sup>st</sup> which means it was tied with 18 schools as ranking just above the lowest ranked school at 207<sup>th</sup>.

### *Implications*

Given the low retention rates at several PASSHE universities with barely 40 percent of enrollees graduating after four years and just over 50 percent graduating after six years, the question has to be: How much money is being misused in the sense that large numbers of students are leaving college after five or six semesters (or possibly fewer) without a degree to bolster their employment and income potential?

Could this problem not be alleviated by going back to a minimum SAT/ACT requirement to gauge student readiness for college course work? Better alternatives to four-year colleges should be available to students who are ill-prepared for college-level studies. That could begin in high school with special attention to more rigorous course work and accurate grading to help students who want to go to college to be better prepared for that level of work.

But worse still, to what degree have colleges lowered their own education standards to meet the lower levels of preparedness to do college work by students doing only C-level work in high school and not vetted by academic standards?

There are many options for students who are not rigorously academically inclined when they are 18 or 19 years old. Encouraging them to go to taxpayer-funded colleges anyway is surely not the best public policy. It is past time to rethink how education dollars are being spent.

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