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How Gov. Shapiro's higher ed plan 'falls short' for state's private colleges, universities

Pennsylvania's private universities empower outcomes, student choice, amid governor's affordability drive

Kathleen Getz Your Turn

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As an education leader in the commonwealth, I appreciate that Gov. Josh Shapiro's recent plan to overhaul the Pennsylvania's higher education system recognizes the critical importance of higher education and workforce development in assuring a strong economic future for our state.

The governor's stated goals to improve Pennsylvania's public universities and to make education more accessible and affordable are laudable. Still, his plan falls short of properly valuing and supporting the critical role that private higher education plays in the commonwealth's success, nor does it honor the wisdom of Pennsylvania's students in choosing the education that best fits them.

Included in the governor's blueprint is a generous cap of \$1,000 per semester on tuition and fees at state-owned universities and community colleges for median-income Pennsylvanians making \$70,000 or less, but only a modest \$1,000 increase for students attending state-related and private universities or colleges. This difference creates a huge gap of thousands of dollars between the public and private higher education sectors, one ultimately borne by the commonwealth's taxpayers.

Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation in the number of private nonprofit colleges and universities, and these schools are the primary source of a degree for most low-income and underrepresented minority students in Pennsylvania, a role filled by public institutions in almost all other states. National measuring sticks like the Economic Mobility Index and the

Wall Street Journal Social Mobility Ranking demonstrate that private schools like ours change lives and empower lower-income students.

Mercyhurst University and other independent universities provide a rich tapestry of opportunities not always found in Pennsylvania's public counterparts, including small class sizes, a focus on a broad liberal arts education, a strong sense of community, tightly knit alumni networks, specialized programs, very high academic standards, and a broad range of financial aid options. We integrate mission-driven values throughout students' entire education, boldly encouraging our students to think critically, creatively, and carefully about what it means to live a life that integrates fulfillment and service, not just what it takes to secure a degree. Further, we educate our students in direct service to the community as we train tomorrow's leaders. Two brief examples illustrate this:

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First, Mercyhurst's Center for Intelligence Research Analysis and Training has taken Mercyhurst's best-in-class intelligence training and equipped over 1,000 students with real-time, real-world experience that has directly benefited more than 250 government entities, private sector companies, and nongovernmental organizations. Just recently, the Center's Secondary Action Intelligence Network Team has helped find six missing children who ran away or were taken unlawfully by a parent. The team has a success rate of 85% and once solved a cold case identifying the location of the missing person in just two days.

Additionally, Mercyhurst is also home to the region's Municipal Police Academy and produces the majority of new police officers in northwest Pennsylvania. Designated as an Act 120 Academy, many of the region's police chiefs are Mercyhurst grads, and Mercyhurst regularly hosts continuing training events for the region's police and emergency response forces.

These are but a couple of examples of our reach, and we're hardly alone in our contributions — Mercyhurst is a proud member of the 90-member Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania. Data shows that our institutions educate 45% of all lower-income, Pell-eligible students, 49% of all "adult" students, 54% of all minority students, and the largest proportion of first generation-to-college students in the state.

We do this while graduating these students at a significantly higher rate with lower average student debt than any sector over the last 10 years. Every year, private schools produce the most new workers entering the Pennsylvania economy of any higher education sector, including in the greatest need occupations: 70% of all nurses, 45% of STEM workers, and 40% of teachers.

Further, AICUP schools generate \$24 billion annually and are an indispensable asset to Pennsylvania's economy. In Erie and northwest Pennsylvania alone, AICUP member schools, including Mercyhurst, account for:

\$931,877,593 generated in economic impact;
7,965 jobs supported and sustained;
\$43,407,921 in state and local tax revenue.

These positive outcomes for the commonwealth are happening with minimal taxpayer expense and the net cost of a degree at Pennsylvania's private schools is much lower than many people think. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the average net tuition and fees (what families pay after school aid and public grants) at independent nonprofit colleges in Pennsylvania is just under \$13,000. In the words of AICUP President Thomas P. Foley, "That's less than it was 10 years ago (even before adjusting for inflation). A degree from [our] schools is actually becoming more affordable, not less."

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Gov. Shapiro is right to call for the state to continue to invest in higher education, but Pennsylvania's students and economy would be best served by a plan that philosophically and financially supports the key places of both public and private education. This is a great time to advance Pennsylvania as a national leader in higher education, but a focus only on state universities and community colleges will result in a decline in choice and will undermine the overall quality of college education in the commonwealth.

More: Gov. Shapiro touts economic plan in Erie: 'I'm sick and tired of losing to friggin' Ohio'

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