



EDUCATION GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Students from Pa. private colleges advocated for financial aid

They travelled from over 25 schools to help convince lawmakers to continue or increase funding for programs that support students attending private schools.

BY: **IAN KARBAL** - APRIL 9, 2025 6:16 PM



AICUP President Tom Foley speaks in the rotunda of the capitol in Harrisburg (Capital-Star photo by Ian Karbal)

On Wednesday, roughly 150 students from independent colleges and universities across Pennsylvania gathered in Harrisburg to advocate for student aid funding. It was part of the annual AICUP (Association of Independent Colleges & Universities of Pennsylvania) Day at the Capitol.

They travelled from over 25 schools to help convince lawmakers to continue or increase funding financial aid programs that support students in the state attending private schools like theirs.

“Programs like PHEAA [Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency] and Ready to Succeed are the reason I can stay at my school and have the opportunity to speak on its behalf today,” Dustin McMullen, a 21-year-old Seton Hill student, said in the rotunda. “I stand here today, and I urge policy makers and stakeholders to continue investing in programs like PHEAA and ready to succeed.”

He said the crowd, made up of fellow college students, administrators, lobbyists and journalists, was larger than his class at Rocky Grove high school in Franklin, which graduates around 60 people every year.



📍 Dustin McMullen at the capitol in Harrisburg for AICUP Day (Capital-Star photo by Ian Karbal)

McMullen, a first-generation college student, told the Capital-Star that he likely would not have been able to attend college without financial assistance. But with state funding, he’s enrolled in a unique program, the early acceptance medical program, where he’s obtaining a liberal arts degree, with a seat in Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine’s grad program awaiting him when he graduates. His goal is to become an anesthesiologist.

For him, it was important to come to Harrisburg and advocate on his and other schools' behalf. Before his speech, McMullen and the other students met with lawmakers and legislative staff members to stress the importance of continued financial aid for students attending private college.

"I'm an RA, a resident assistant, at Seton Hill. So I see residents who struggle with finances, but thanks to these financial aid programs, they're able to come and get the opportunity that they wouldn't get at other places."

Tom Foley, the president of AICUP, which represents 85 schools, stressed the importance of funding education at independent colleges. And part of that, he said, is dispelling myths about the kinds of students private schools attract

"I think most people assume that low income kids are all in publicly-funded schools," Foley said. "But actually, the majority of them are in these schools."

According to data provided by AICUP, out of all students working towards bachelor's degrees in Pennsylvania, 46% of lower-income Pell Grant-eligible students attend independent schools. That also includes 47% of students receiving PHEAA grants, and 52% of underrepresented minority students seeking both bachelor's and advanced degrees.

Collectively, 275,000 students seeking four-year degrees attend AICUP schools.



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Foley said that he doesn't predict a decline in funding from the state legislature for student financial assistance programs, but is worried about the impacts of the federal government's moves to slash funding at some universities around the country.

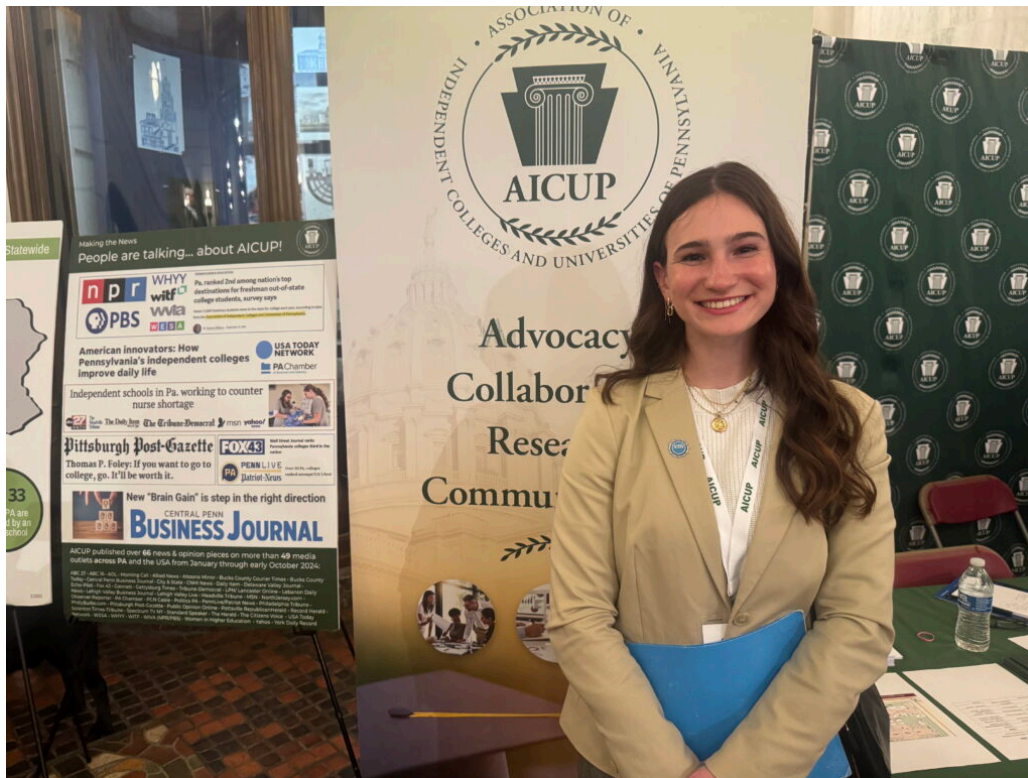
In March, Foley wrote a letter to Pennsylvania's congressional delegation, [warning about the potential impacts of proposed funding cuts](#) to research programs at colleges and universities,

including 35 AICUP member schools. Now, he's worried what will happen to direct student aid.

“We're very concerned,” he said. “But we can't tell yet. When they've talked about higher education in the new administration, they always say, ‘We're going to protect Pell Grants. We're going to protect the student aid programs.’ Hopefully, that is the case.”

Olivia Fabiano, a senior at Elizabethtown College, also made the trip to the Capitol. .

Like McMullen, for her, this is personal. Fabiano said she likely would not have been able to afford tuition at the school without financial assistance, especially with other college-aged siblings and a brother with costly medical needs.



📷 Olivia Fabiano at the capitol in Harrisburg for AICUP Day (Capital-Star photo by Ian Karbal)

“I think it's important for everybody to have that equal opportunity to receive the higher education that they know they deserve,” Fabiano said. “There shouldn't be a financial burden holding a student back from pursuing any sort of college, or the one that they want to be at.”

She was drawn to Elizabethtown over other state-owned and state-related schools because of the small class sizes. She had been able to attend a private middle school because her mom worked there, and

attributed the level of individualized attention she could receive to her social and academic success.

Coming to Harrisburg, Fabiano felt that communicating her lived experience to lawmakers would be more effective than AICUP just providing them with statistics. And it was a chance to see first-hand how the process works. As a marketing student, she hopes to land a job at an advocacy organization, or in government, where she feels that she's working towards positive change.

"I'm very interested in doing marketing for something like this, in politics," Fabiano said. "I'm actually having coffee with someone on [Governor Josh] Shapiro's communications team because it's so interesting to me."

Dashawn Sheffield, another student who travelled to Harrisburg, felt it was important to tell lawmakers how much financial assistance meant to him. He said financial aid programs, like the Ready to Succeed scholarship, along with four jobs on and off campus, are the reason he is able to attend Lafayette College. It was his second year attending an AICUP day at the capital.

"These grants do not just fund education," Sheffield told a crowd in the rotunda. "They fuel opportunity, ambition and success."



📷 Dashawn Sheffield speaks at the Capitol in Harrisburg for AICUP Day (Capital-Star photo by Ian Karbal)

Another reason he wanted to be on hand is because of his fascination with politics – he’s double majoring in government and international politics. And, in his spare time, he advocates for campaign finance reform in Pennsylvania.

“I’ve always known I wanted to be a politician of some sort,” Sheffield said. “I am really looking to make a large-scale impact one day.”

For him, two years of coming to Harrisburg to advocate for low-income students like himself helped build that resolve.

“It really strengthened that for me, being able to experience firsthand testifying, giving a speech, and also speaking to the legislators,” Sheffield said. “I’m leaving knowing I was a voice for many different students like me.”



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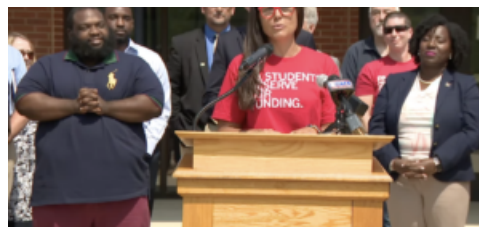
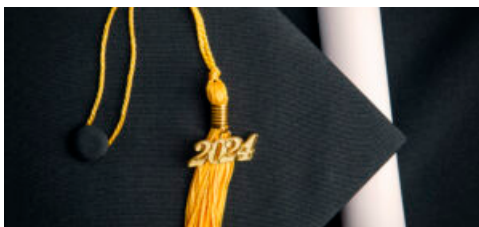
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Ian Karbal covers state government for the Pennsylvania Capital-Star. He's particularly interested in the influence of money in politics and how arcane policies affect Pennsylvanians across the state.

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