

AICUP president Tom Foley appeared at the top of the Philly section in Sunday's print edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer, advocating for higher education. (April 20, 2025).

<https://www.inquirer.com/education/state-higher-education-board-hearing-saint-josephs-20250417.html>

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

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PHILLY & REGION

Enhancing the 'college-going culture' in Pa.

At a hearing in Philly, a new higher ed board focused on attracting more students and helping them pay for it.

By Susan Snyder
Staff Writer

Attracting more students from out of state, working closely with businesses to meet their needs and high schools to create a "college-going culture," and offering grants to help students near college completion were some ideas floated during a hearing Thursday on higher education in Pennsylvania.

Much of the conversation centered on the need to help students afford college and ways to

encourage more of them to attend at a time when the number of high school graduates in Pennsylvania is projected to decline 12% by 2037 and the higher education sector as a whole faces great challenges.

The two-hour hearing at St. Joseph's University was the third of six being held around Pennsylvania by the new State Board of Higher Education as it forms a strategic plan to provide better coordination and access among the state's institutions. The board intends to release a plan by Sept. 1.

"Higher education now more than ever must grow and evolve," said St. Joseph's University president Cheryl McConnell, a member of the state board. "A degree or a certificate is not just a credential, it's a catalyst. It's the foundation upon which we will build solutions for problems we have not yet to

imagine."

There were nearly 200 participants online and in person from across the higher education sector, including community colleges and public and private four-year institutions, as well as businesses, government, and community organizations from throughout the Philadelphia region.

What ideas were suggested?

Some of the ideas were concrete and specific.

"We have about 5,000 adults who can't go to college because they have an outstanding back balance, and we can help one at a time, but what we would love to see is more of a collaborative, regional approach that could be

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Tom Foley, president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania, touts the role that private universities play in the state during a hearing held by the Pennsylvania State Board of Higher Education. Tom Grubish / Staff Photographer

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Making sure students graduate on time is key to addressing the debt issue, said Tom Foley, president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania. The issue appears to be especially acute at public schools, he said.

“I looked at the data on student debt between publicly funded institution graduates and graduates of independent nonprofit schools,” he said. “In the last 10 years, the independent nonprofit schools’ average debt was actually lower — not by much, but it was lower than the average student debt for kids from publicly funded schools. And when I look at what the reason was for that, in a lot of cases, it’s because kids are not graduating on time.”

At private schools, he said, they are more focused on providing students with additional services to make sure they graduate on time.

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