

Testimony of Senator David G. Argall (R-Berks/Schuylkill)
Senate Education Committee & House Education Committee
Joint Public Hearing: RAND Corporation's study of the PASSHE system
April 30, 2018 | 11:00 a.m.
Room 8E-A, East Wing
State Capitol
Harrisburg, PA 17120

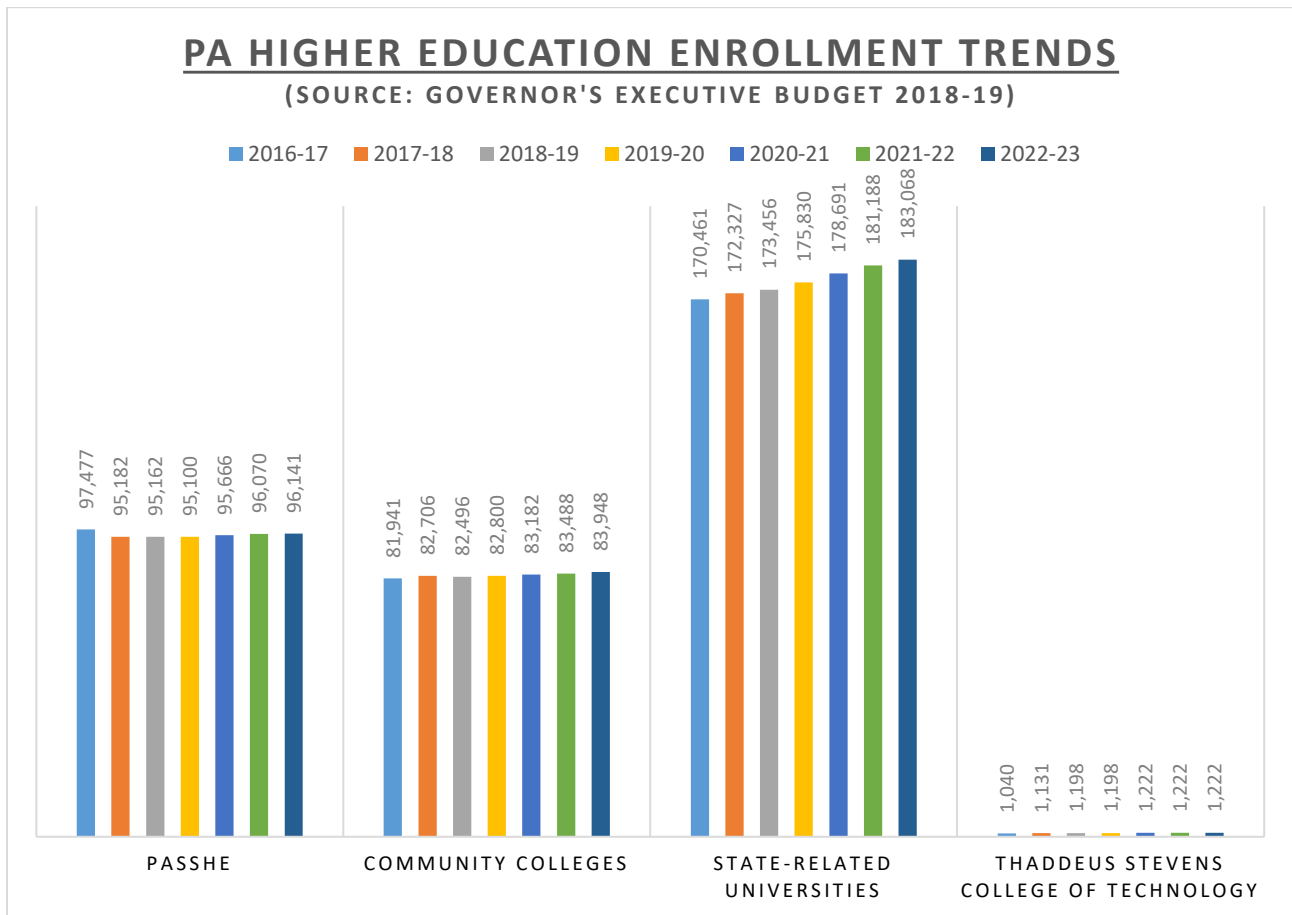
Thank you, Chairmen Eichelberger, Dinniman, Hickernell, Roebuck and members of the House and Senate Education committees. I appreciate the opportunity to provide a few comments about the genesis of Senate Resolution 34, which called for an independent study of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE).

The Governor's Executive Budget contains a section on higher education enrollment trends regarding the four entities funded in the state budget: the state-related universities, community colleges, Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology and PASSHE.

During last year's Senate Appropriations Committee state budget hearings, those enrollment trends caught my attention. I wanted to know why PASSHE's total number of students is declining, while other Pennsylvania colleges and universities are growing.

In Governor Wolf's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2018-19, the enrollment forecast paints an even more troubling future for PASSHE. Between Fiscal Years 2016-17 and 2022-23, PASSHE is anticipated to lose 1 percent of its enrollment, while community colleges are expected to grow enrollment by 2 percent, state related universities by 7 percent and Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology by 18 percent. Even more troubling, as you know, many of the PASSHE universities are expected to decline by much, much more than just 1 percent.

The chart below illustrates the issue confronting our 14 state-owned universities when compared to other areas of higher education in Pennsylvania.



The chart is crystal clear: Our 14 state-owned universities have a serious problem and the General Assembly needs serious answers.

Because of these trends, I was approached by men and women who care deeply about PASSHE. They are graduates, they are professors, they are administrators, they are trustees and they are students. That's why I introduced Senate Resolution 34.

Some will say that more state funding is what is needed to fix PASSHE. I caution against using that as the only approach, given the data.

No single entity in higher education has been immune to budget challenges over the past decade. From Fiscal Year 2008-09 to Fiscal Year 2017-18, PASSHE's funding has been reduced by 13 percent, however, during that same time, the funding for the state-related universities has dropped 19 percent. Penn State University has seen its funding reduced by 25 percent over that time span. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, state-related universities are expected to add more students over the next seven years, while PASSHE is anticipated to lose more students.

The bottom line is more tax dollars do not always equate to better results.

The State System made a good first step by agreeing to do their own study. However, many expressed major reservations about a troubled system studying itself.

My resolution's goal was to conduct a separate study of the State System to give us an unbiased report and unbiased solutions. Senate Resolution 34 had 18 cosponsors, including 15 Republicans and 3 Democrats. More importantly, the resolution was approved with the unanimous support of the Senate by a vote of 50-0 on April 18, 2017.

I think all of us in this room can agree with this premise: our 14 state-owned universities are wonderful institutions with a long tradition of affordable education for Pennsylvania families. I requested this study to help us understand why these trends are occurring and how the problem can be remedied.

Many of us attended classes at one of these institutions. And if we did not personally attend, we certainly know many people – spouses, friends, neighbors, parents, grandparents or our children – who graduated from a PASSHE university and who remain convinced that it was one of the best decision of their lives to study there.

In my own family, we trace these ties to my grandfather Argall, who graduated from the “Kutztown Normal School” in 1928, so I well understand the special place in our hearts that these universities have rightfully claimed.

But time marches on. The needs of students and the universities changed greatly from the 1920s to the 1950s, when my parents attended Bloomsburg and Kutztown. The needs changed again when my best friends attended PASSHE universities in the 1970s and again when my children's friends attended there during the last decade.

The RAND Corporation Study provides us with a variety of opportunities to pursue to allow the State System to evolve and adapt so that it can continue to prepare students for the jobs of the 21st century.

I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in this study – the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, the RAND Corporation, and my colleagues in the House and Senate.

Now we must carefully consider all of the options presented to us in the RAND Corporation's study but realize one thing: the status quo regarding the PASSHE System is unacceptable.

In academic research, we often consider what is called the “no action alternative.” We do not have this alternative today regarding the PASSHE universities. If we—the House, the Senate, the Governor—if we fail to act now, the alternatives which all of us—students, faculty, state government officials—will face in the future only become much more troubling. Thank you.