



PASSHE Helps Rural Pennsylvania Thrive

Many high school graduates from rural and suburban communities are drawn to urban areas to attend college, leaving their smaller hometowns behind. However, these smaller communities depend on local graduates to fill employment needs, from doctors and nurses to teachers; and to become the next generation of community or business leaders. Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) institutions focus on low- and middle-income communities in mostly rural areas of Pennsylvania. According to PASSHE Chancellor Dan Greenstein, STEM, health care, education, and business make up 60% of their students and over 60% of their programs.

Fortunately, of the 85,000 students in the system, 90% of them are from Pennsylvania; of PASSHE's graduates, two-thirds of them are still in the state 10 years after graduation.

"We take people from Pennsylvania, lift them up, place them back into Pennsylvania, and they contribute back to the economy and the benefit of the society," Greenstein said. "This is what public higher education is, or at least ought to be all about."

However, when Greenstein came to PASSHE in September 2018 after working six years at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, this mission — to enable social mobility and look out for smaller, often-overlooked communities — was becoming challenging. Some of PASSHE's smaller schools were down to program numbers far too low for sustaining the system's student families and their towns.



Case Study

Main Challenge

Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education had to consolidate campuses and teach their disparate systems to communicate.

Solutions

Ellucian Banner Cloud
Ellucian Experience

Results

- Renewed program breadth
- More students entering local workforce
- At-risk campuses saved

What had happened?

Greenstein quickly identified two major problems common to public higher education systems. First, states were spending fewer dollars per student to keep public higher education afloat. In order to fill the gap to meet student needs, institutions and systems across the country have had to raise prices. These increases are absorbed relatively easily in some communities, but areas like the ones PASSHE serves are hit the hardest as they struggle to keep up with increasing education costs.

“Well known in the news is the price of higher education continues to grow even at affordable institutions like ours,” Greenstein said. “Because we’re owned by the state, we’re the most affordable option in the state — \$5,000 less than our nearest competitor — but we’re also pricing ourselves out of the market for the low- and middle-income families that we were born to serve.”

Second, PASSHE soon realized it was suffering from an increasingly familiar pattern of troubles that seemed to plague higher education: Kicked off by lower birth rates in recent years, fewer students were entering the postsecondary education system. As student numbers shrank, institutions began carefully narrowing the number of programs they offered. In turn, fewer choices meant further enrollment reduction. These factors fed into each other and became a self-perpetuating cycle that was detrimental to the institutions — and rural Pennsylvania — in a major way.

As colleges continued to shave off program offerings in order to accommodate their shrinking student bodies, PASSHE had two goals in mind: First, they had to stabilize their system financially, and soon. Second, and further out, they needed to ensure that they could continue to provide workforce development, social mobility, and overall support for rural Pennsylvania.

“Universities and colleges traditionally will manage and operate the full stack of functions that they need to sustain themselves as universities,” Greenstein said. “They will do payroll, they will do HR, they will do labor relations, they will do the academic affairs, they will manage their financial aid packaging.

“Those universities aren’t necessarily equipped to maintain that full stack of operations [...] and keep the costs low for their students. When you’re serving low- and middle-income markets, you can’t just raise tuition to the levels that we see in some of the privates and most selectives.”

How could PASSHE facilitate and accommodate both its goals?

PASSHE decided to share and consolidate all its student information systems (SIS). This, Greenstein said, would lower costs, reduce risk, and



improve quality. PASSHE leaders rolled up their sleeves and got to work on a full system redesign. Soon, OneSIS emerged.

OneSIS is a State System project to migrate all universities to the Ellucian Banner Cloud. The philosophy behind OneSIS is that every student on every campus has to be able to take a course or a program at any other campus. The hard part for students is reasonably finding each course, making sense of how it will fit into their program, registering for and taking the courses, getting the transcript for those courses sent to them, and making sure those courses get recognized in their financial aid application.

“Which is where OneSIS comes in,” Greenstein said. “Without OneSIS, that is impossible.”

PASSHE completed the first phase of moving to OneSIS, linking several of its schools. This enabled the sharing and consolidation of their previous SIS’s and related software among the included PASSHE institutions. It reexpanded program breadth as well.

“The smaller schools were going to compress their programs to 20 or 30,” Greenstein said. “When I say programs—majors, minors—20 or 30, that’s not a lot.” It would also negatively affect their communities, since so many PASSHE students graduate and return to their communities as doctors, nurses, business leaders, teachers, and more.

Greenstein found that by pulling together just four of the PASSHE schools to begin with, institutions that could only offer 30 programs could now offer more than 100.

“Without the ability to do that kind of cross-enrollment, to share programs and courses, I don’t think we would’ve been able to save those schools.”

Now, with OneSIS in place, rural Pennsylvania is set to receive more college graduates with a broader range of degrees—who are ready to work more jobs that require postsecondary education.

PASSHE picked Ellucian’s Banner Cloud as their tech solution for OneSIS. As Greenstein pointed out, Ellucian is an early adopter of cloud-based SIS management. This showed him the potential efficiencies that Ellucian could offer PASSHE to overcome its challenges. In their earliest conversations, Ellucian leadership demonstrated to Greenstein its planned trajectory for PASSHE’s redesign.



“[That] really touched in areas that we were passionate about: That course sharing and program sharing being one of them, the data sharing being another,” he said. “You know, the opportunities downstream.

“We were obviously glad to land with Ellucian, and through project management and implementation, they were there for us.”

When it came to integrating several schools, Greenstein said, one intimidating point is that it wasn't a simple matter of adding all of their systems together. They had to build a completely new system and integrate all the older ones into it. This left little margin for error because, as he pointed out, PASSHE couldn't just close their doors for a year or two and tell students to come back. To do so would hinder their service to low- and middle-income communities, grinding to a halt the education of 10 to 12,000 students.

“I can tell you for a fact, we have great people. We have really, really good IT people who were integral in all this, but we didn't have the capability for this kind of build. So when we began to experience that these projects are really complicated and required kind of new thinking about how the teams interacted with one another, Ellucian proved to be incredibly responsive. We've learned a tremendous amount from them.”

According to Greenstein, it's working. Four institutions have implemented OneSIS for student enrollment, and by Spring 2024 PASSHE hopes to use it at either six or seven of their schools.

“Given the criticality of OneSIS not just through the integrated schools, but to the mission and the longer term vision for the system, there's no way we could have done it on our own. We had to have a partner, and we had to have a partner that sort of shared our goals and was wanting to get itself to the same place.

“And Ellucian is that partner.”



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