# Penn State faces growing opposition over proposed Commonwealth campus closures



A growing debate has emerged at Pennsylvania State University concerning the proposed closure of several Commonwealth campuses, as a faculty group and current and former trustees voice strong opposition to the plan. The university's administration is expected to soon decide which campuses may shut, but recent criticism highlights concerns about the impact on student diversity and the university’s land-grant mission.

The president of the Penn State chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), Michelle Rodino-Colocino, has publicly criticised the administration’s approach. In letters addressed to Penn State president Neeli Bendapudi and the board of trustees, Rodino-Colocino warned that closing campuses “could roll back recent improvements in serving students from underrepresented backgrounds — Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Native Alaskan, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.” She points to the success of the Commonwealth Campus model and recruitment efforts in diverse cities like Pittsburgh and Philadelphia as key factors in achieving greater accessibility and diversity.

Rodino-Colocino, who is an associate professor in film production and media studies, also reproached the administration for excluding faculty from the decision-making process. “The Penn State AAUP chapter calls on the administration to reverse its decision, and, from today forward, to involve faculty as primary decision-makers in academic budgeting,” her letter stated.

Adding to the opposition, trustees Jay Paterno and Ted Brown, alongside other university figures including trustee emeritus Alice Pope, former trustee Randy Houston, and former alumni council member Jeff Ballou, have issued a public letter in an op-ed published on StateCollege.com. They acknowledge the university’s annual loss of $40 million to $50 million operating the 20 campuses but note that this represents only about 0.4% of Penn State’s $10 billion annual budget. They argue that this comparatively small financial investment is vital to the university’s foundational land-grant mission of providing educational access throughout Pennsylvania.

“That 0.4% is an investment in the soul of Penn State and the heart of our land-grant mission to bring access to the university to people across the commonwealth,” they wrote. “That 0.4% seems like a small price to pay for our soul.” Trustee Ted Brown, a longtime advocate for the Commonwealth campuses who previously suggested expanding student numbers at these campuses instead of raising tuition, described them as “hidden gems” and expressed hope that enrolments could be restored to levels seen a decade ago.

The move to consider closures follows a sustained decline in enrolment at Commonwealth campuses. Overall enrolment stood at approximately 24,000 last June, reflecting a decrease of about 30% since 2010. The most recent fall showed a 2% overall drop, with a more significant 8.4% fall in first-year intake. At the 12 campuses under review — including Beaver, DuBois, Fayette, Greater Allegheny, Hazleton, Mont Alto, New Kensington, Schuylkill, Shenango, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and York — enrolment has diminished by 39%, or 3,222 students, from 2014 to 2024. This contrasts with the broader university, where overall enrolment decreased by only 4% during this period, while the flagship University Park campus grew by 5%.

President Bendapudi acknowledged the challenges in February, stating: “It has become clear that we cannot sustain a viable Commonwealth Campus ecosystem without closing some campuses.” She initially anticipated announcing closure decisions before the spring commencement but has since postponed this to after the ceremonies scheduled for 9 to 11 May. In a statement, she explained, “Final exams and commencement are rapidly approaching — activities of great significance for our entire community. My team has consulted with students, faculty, and staff on the timing of any announcements, and I agree with their broad recommendation to hold until after these milestone events.”

Certain campuses—specifically the three in the Philadelphia region (Brandywine, Abington, and the graduate education-focused Great Valley campus)—along with Altoona, Behrend, Berks, Harrisburg, and Lehigh Valley, are confirmed to be excluded from the closure considerations due to their size and significance.

The review of the other 12 campuses is being led by a team of top administrators appointed by Bendapudi. Margo DelliCarpini, vice president for Commonwealth campuses and part of this leadership team, has announced she will be leaving this summer to become provost and vice president of academic affairs at the College of New Jersey.

Beyond administrative voices, concerns are also being raised by faculty members such as Carla Chamberlin, a professor of applied linguistics at Penn State Abington. She emphasised the diverse circumstances of many students, saying, “Some of my students at Penn State Abington work full-time jobs and are raising children.” She added, “That is the mission of Penn State, to serve a wide population of students, not just those who can afford to go to University Park.”

Faculty and trustees alike are urging the university to consider alternative approaches and to utilise its substantial financial reserves—reported to exceed $5 billion—to sustain the campuses rather than proceed with closures. The trustees’ letter called for more time to explore “innovative solutions before making legacy decisions that will have impacts lasting long after we are gone.”

The Philadelphia Inquirer is reporting on these developments as Penn State's decision approaches amid an intensifying debate about the future of its Commonwealth campuses and the balance between fiscal prudence and maintaining broad accessibility across the state.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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