

**Testimony of Cameron O'Neill**  
**Junior at Bloomsburg University Honors College**  
**Before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee**  
**Policy Hearing on Public Higher Education**  
**Monday, May 17, 2021 – 10am – 1pm**

Chairwoman Muth, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the committee,

Throughout my life and my high school career, I've made a lot of friends. I've joined a lot of clubs, and I've taken a lot of classes. Those things come and go, and the memories have slowly faded through time. However, I know that my time at Bloomsburg University (BU) will be something I carry with me throughout the rest of my life. For me, the name of Bloomsburg University carries a lot of weight- and it's one of the very reasons I chose to come here in the first place.

As a first-generation college student with two kids, my mom chose BU for herself, where she graduated in 2006. She was welcomed into one of the most diverse universities, with the most dedicated faculty and staff. The close-knit environment gave her ultimate support, where she graduated magna cum laude, and was awarded the *James Sperry* History award, and the *Egerton Osunde* Secondary Ed award. Our unique campus community is what allowed her to flourish, and as a first-generation student she was celebrated and supported. Her inspiring story is what brought me to Bloomsburg. Not because she is an alumna and wanted me to go here, but because I trusted that if I came here, my experience would be nothing short of incredible.

I am sure students who choose Lock Haven and Mansfield do so for important and personal reasons. However, going to Lock Haven or Mansfield was never even a thought for me. I chose BU because it is a school that supported my mom, gave her a real chance, and changed her life, and I want the same for myself. I chose it because it's a beautiful campus, and because they have an honors college with opportunities that will shape my career, study abroad programs that will open my eyes, and internships that will prepare me for life after college, which is why I wanted to go to a university in the first place.

Consolidating these three schools will erase all the blood, sweat, and tears that went into forming this one diverse, strong, safe campus. For many, Bloomsburg University is home. We can take three schools and form one house, but it won't ever be the same *home*.

Although the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought us new amazing and innovative ways of communication and education through technology, we have failed to analyze them and ask what is working and what is not. After being lucky enough to spend my first year as a student on campus with in-person classes and experiences, I cannot help but compare my current education. I have learned that although some aspects of technology can be of great help in education, a full hybrid education through this consolidation would be detrimental to students' educations.

As a double major in philosophy and Spanish, my classes require a lot of conversation and communication. To learn a language, it is not only important to understand the speaking language, but also peoples' lips, body language, and facial expressions. Through online classes, there are countless factors that take away from all these understandings. No matter how amazing

our online systems are, we can never replace in-person language learning. There will always be power outages, Wi-Fi shortages, and miscommunications due to lags in the system, or damage to phones and laptops that we use to join. Not to mention that those things are expensive, and not everyone can afford them.

My last three semesters online have not helped my language skills, but possibly made them worse. I recognize how hard my professors are working, but nothing will be able to stop students from searching up something on google translate or turning off their cameras, so they don't have to talk. When in a classroom, students are forced to speak directly to each other, face to face, so the ability to speak quickly is much more likely. If my classes continue online, I will graduate with a degree but no knowledge, no real skills. I take that this is the same for almost all other classes. For the last several semesters, students have been searching for their answers online, and retaining almost zero information. Each class we take is essential to our future jobs. How will we send our students into the world to be doctors, lawyers, and other professions when they received most of their answers from google? As a future defense lawyer for minority kids, I need to communicate with my defendants in Spanish. The quality of their lives depends on how well I can communicate with them- and I cannot do that without in-person interactions in my classes.

As for my philosophy classes, the online semesters have not given me the skills needed to increase my ability to critically think. I can read my books and write my papers, but the impactful learning happens when students can discuss things with their peers and professors- like real life, real jobs, and real situations. In our future careers, reality won't be reading something and submitting a paper; it will be reading, analyzing, and discussing, but we lose those skills when we are talking through a screen.

After talking with many of my peers, I have discovered that I am not alone in this struggle. Many students are forced to teach themselves in their synchronous and asynchronous classes. This means that right now, we are paying to teach ourselves for a *grade*. Our money is not being used to learn or absorb information, but to do something for a grade and forget it five seconds later. Students may like the idea of online classes because it is easier for them, but that is not the job of our universities. We go to universities to be educated so that we are prepared for life after college. This should mean eliminating online classes when it is safe, so that we can get back on track for learning the best way. If I wanted to continue learning how I am now, then I would leave BU, save money, and purchase a subscription to *duo lingo*.

I understand that we had no other learnings options during the pandemic, that any education is better than none, and that everything was done for students to continue during these difficult times. But this cannot and should not continue outside of the pandemic. Just because online classes are *an* option, doesn't mean that they are the *best* option. If hybrid courses become the only option during this consolidation, then it would be setting our students up for failure; we need to be pushed, challenged, and taught. *If I wanted to take online classes, I would have chosen a school that offered online classes.* I chose Bloomsburg because they offered interactive, personal classes in small, inclusive classrooms. If Hybrid classes are required in the future, I won't see it as the same BU education anymore. And although nothing can ever replace this university, I would consider finding a different university with those interactive in-person classes. And from talking with peers, I can almost guarantee that a lot of other students will too.

This doesn't even include how faculty and staff would be affected. There are countless ways that they will be impacted if classes are offered Hybrid. It will be difficult for them to balance online and in-person classes, as well as having patience to deal with the pressure of

knowing that they are not able to educate their students properly and fully. They chose to work at BU because of the specific environment that it provides; people choosing to work at a university count in as many factors as students choosing to attend a university. Perhaps some of our faculty and staff based their decisions off how diverse and full of life BU students are. Or maybe they chose BU because when they went there twenty years ago, they decided that this is where they wanted to be forever. If we are offered hybrid courses, many students will choose the path of online simply because it is the easiest grade- resulting in empty classrooms. If that happens, our staff and faculty will no longer be essential to campus and will most likely lose their jobs; or if they keep their jobs, it will look like a much different university than when they started. If we lose our faculty and staff, we lose the integrity of BU.

Finally, the town of Bloomsburg would be directly impacted by this consolidation. If classes are offered hybrid and students take advantage of it, then campus will be emptier. This means fewer students on campus, fewer students off- campus, and fewer students traveling downtown. By default, our downtown business would struggle to stay afloat, due to the lack of students. The town of Bloomsburg is the result of BU students. We live there, shop there, and work there. Hybrid classes mean less housing, less shopping, and less business all around. If there is less business, then there are less workers needed- which would mean taking jobs away from students that are struggling to stay out of debt and putting family businesses at risk of that same fate.

As a student that is involved in a lot on campus, I felt complete shock when we were forced into quarantine halfway through the Spring 2020 semester. The activities and experiences that I had during my first year were put on hold, and by default my college life too.

One of the most valuable things I am a part of on campus is the honors college. We are a small group of students who search for challenges and opportunities that exceed our regular classes and set us apart from other students. I took part in many educational trips around the country, as well as one in Poland. I was given many resources and created bonds with other honors students that I will never forget. I was able to do this because we are a small, close-knit community. If there is a consolidation, will other students be invited into this? If so, will the opportunities that I have had in the past still be available? Will the classrooms still only have eight students in it, perfect for deep and personal class conversations? Will they still offer trips for students, or will there not be any funding due to the number of students?

Another thing that I value greatly is my work-study job of two years. Under a consolidated university, what will that job look like? BU offers a lot of work-study jobs that our students rely on to pay their bills. Will we have to compete to hold these positions in the future? Further, the work study jobs on campus are unique to our BU campus community and offering them to students at different universities would take away from the special feeling of our campus.

Along with my work-study job is my position as a HOWL (Husky Orientation and Welcome Leader). As a HOWL, I give students tours, participate in orientation, and help with move-in onto campus. Under a consolidation, would I need to re-train to learn about Mansfield and Lock Haven? I do not want to learn all the details about universities that I chose to not attend. Further, my interactions with students from the other universities would not be the same, because I don't have personal experiences there. When I give tours and interact with families, the things I tell them are inspired by my story and my life here on campus. It's the passion I have for BU that allows me to enjoy this job and to continue doing it over the years.

I am also a husky ambassador, where I get the opportunity to interact with alumni of BU. I hear their stories and use them to make connections for myself and other students. I learn about how their experiences at BU led them to where they are today and share my experiences too; it keeps the alumni connected with students and the university that they love even ten years after their graduations. I learn about professors they had their sophomore years that I now have, and their favorite restaurants that are now my favorite too. This is what connects BU as a community and makes it so special; it isn't just our current students that form the BU community, it's generations of them.

Bloomsburg University has given me the chance to travel the world. As a first-year student in the honors college, I went on a winter study- abroad trip to Poland. While we were there, we also traveled to Germany, Hungary, and the Baltic States. We went with a small group of students, and the experience I gained will be forever irreplaceable. Learning about the Holocaust in a high-school class is one thing but being at Auschwitz and walking where the victims of it walked is something completely different. Students can't be taught emotions or experiences in a classroom, so BU took us where we *could* learn them- and I am so grateful for that. I now plan on traveling to Spain in the fall semester, where I will get the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the language, culture, and foods- which can never be replicated or replaced in the classroom.

What will consolidation mean for these opportunities? Will fewer students be given the opportunity to study abroad? What about scholarships? The more students, the less money to go around. When I traveled to Poland, I relied heavily on scholarships to get me there. I was awarded money from a Professional Experience Grant (PEG), and from other small family donors. These donations come directly from Alumni of BU who want to support students in their academics (internships, study abroad, etc.). However, what happens when alumni don't want to donate anymore because BU isn't the same after the consolidation? The BU that they went to twenty years ago would not be the same anymore. Fewer donations mean less funding for students, which means less opportunities to study abroad and intern.

Finally, what about the workload of our staff and faculty after consolidation? Will three schools mean three times the work? Will our departments need to learn about the equivalent departments at Mansfield and Lock Haven? Will they need to know the ins and outs of everything, or will they simply be fired? All of this is asking too much of our already stressed and overworked team members. If they are overworked, that will directly impact the students' educations. If professors cannot do their jobs to the best of their abilities, students are going to pay the price for that on top of our already high tuition. Finally, will they be able to do their jobs successfully from one campus, or will they need to travel to the others? And if the classes are going to offered hybrid, can they perform their jobs hybrid as well? Specifically in the Philosophy department, the professors are already taking on a huge workload; will they be asked to teach students from both Mansfield and Lockhaven as well? Consolidating three schools and taking away many jobs in the process seems more like hurt than help. Further, every single job on this campus is important, and every worker completes this community. If workers start being taken away, then our campus will be taken away with them.

My last concern is the outreach to students regarding this consolidation. The marketing of it is not reaching students effectively, or nearly anywhere near where it should be. Students are not *just students*. They read what they must for their classes, they study, and they take exams, but they also do the other millions of things that are demanded of them (as students, parents, workers, family members, friends, and simply human beings). Not to mention that this is happening during a crazy time in our lives- a pandemic, online classes, and during finals week. Simply sending one email once a week giving a brief description of what this consolidation would look like is *not enough*. And it is not the way to reach our students- which clearly demonstrates how information in Hybrid classes won't reach our students effectively either. We need our faculty and staff informed so that they can effectively and accurately inform us. We need people *asking us* what *we need* and what *we want*. If this is all being centered on "student success", then the entire plan needs to be started by focusing on *students*. Not what other people *think* we need, but what we *actually need*. As a current student, I can confirm that the only thing I have received (and completed) regarding our needs was one survey asking for a name of the consolidated schools. There was no option on that survey that asked if we thought this was a good idea, or if we even wanted to choose a new name. Finally, the social media outreach is there, but it's not enough. We simply need more information so that we can understand before forming opinions. I spoke to several students and not one of them could tell me anything about this consolidation.

My intentions are not to disrespect any of the members of the team working on the consolidation, and I appreciate the wanting to help these three schools. I don't know enough information regarding this to judge it as a good or a bad idea, but I can recommend that the people who *are* informed, begin informing others.

Thank you for your time.

Cameron O'Neill