

CALU



PA Senate Democratic Caucus Policy Committee Hearing:

Impact of the State System of Higher Education Redesign Plan

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Good afternoon Senator Muth, policy committee members, colleagues and guests.

I am Dr. Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson, president of Clarion University, interim president of Edinboro University and presidential lead for the State System's proposed Western Integration.

You are aware that the proposed integration would bring together Edinboro in Northwestern Pennsylvania, Clarion University about 80 miles southeast of here, and California University in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Rich histories, proud traditions

All three schools offer rich histories and proud traditions that span more than 150 years. Founded as institutions to prepare much-needed teachers for their respective regions, each of the three campuses has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of students, employers, the Commonwealth and beyond. While each change over the course of our long histories no doubt brought some reservations, all proved to be necessary pivots, allowing us to continue to provide the greatest possible educational experiences for tens of thousands of students. We see integration as a next step in this evolution – one that brings inevitable uncertainties, but is also necessary to ensure that we can continue to serve our mission and the students who are at its heart.

Transformative experiences

Many of the students we serve as regional comprehensive public institutions come from families of modest means and are often the first in their families to go to college. Edinboro, Clarion and California have provided access to opportunity and entre to socio-economic mobility.

The transformative experiences we provide through dedicated faculty members and a supportive infrastructure help to fuel students' passions, grow their confidence, and put them on trajectories they often could never have imagined.

An alumna who grew up in a dying steel town, came to Edinboro following high school graduation, and found a faculty member who changed the course of her life is just one example. Her faculty mentor sparked her interest in using photography for advocacy and opened the door to a MacArthur genius grant, awarded to those who show exceptional creativity in their work. That alumna now exhibits her work in galleries around the globe and in renowned publications such as the New York Times and Vanity Fair. She is using her talents to make the world a better place.

Another example is a Cal U alumnus, a son of immigrants who grew up in a coal-mining town. Through the generosity of then-California State Teacher College administrators, he earned a degree, becoming first a teacher and then entering the medical field. Today, he pays it forward as a philanthropist.

There is also a Clarion alumna, who was raised by her grandmother until she passed away. For the four years following her grandmother's death, the alumna was homeless

until she was awarded the W.S. Tippin Scholarship to attend and play basketball for Clarion. She now works as a professional disc jockey and shares her passion by teaching art, attempting to end the cycle of poverty by ensuring that others will always have a way to make a living.

These three alumni reflect the grit and determination so common among Edinboro, Clarion and Cal U students. They are passionate, purposeful and persistent, despite the challenges many of them face, often juggling their studies with jobs and sometimes family responsibilities. When Commencement day arrives, it is truly a cause for celebration for them and for us.

Student stories mirror my own

The stories of our students resonate with me. I am a first-generation student and a product of state public regional comprehensive universities, so I can tell you from first-hand experience that there is a ripple effect to education. Faculty and staff members, and even college presidents, are stewards who have the privilege of touching the future.

The mission we serve is so important. We transform the lives of students who then go on to improve their communities, the Commonwealth and the broader world. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning and why I am with you here today.

Conversations with stakeholders

Over the past several months, I've had many conversations with various stakeholder groups, both internal and external to our universities. I've held regular "tea times" with faculty, staff and students at both Clarion and Edinboro, providing updates and answering questions about integration. I meet monthly with the faculty Senate and have met with APSCUF and other bargaining unit leadership. Moreover, I've interacted regularly with our student trustees and Student Government Association presidents. I've also shared news of integration with our alumni association and foundation boards. Externally, I've met with public officials, local community and business leaders, and other important stakeholders that serve our regions.

The message has been loud and clear – our campuses are critical anchors in our communities and our regions. They evoke loyalty and commitment that is impressive and inspiring.

And while there is some uncertainty about what the future holds for our three campuses, there is a passion about ensuring they not only endure, but thrive.

What integration will make possible

Integration will allow these three sister institutions in Western Pennsylvania to harness their collective strengths and provide students with a wealth of opportunities not found at any single institution. Indeed, not only will we expand opportunities and support services, integration will allow us to hold down costs for students at all three campuses.

Integration will financially strengthen institutions to ensure all three will continue to serve. We will continue to invest in and maintain our brick-and-mortar buildings, while creating a more robust virtual campus. Our plan is to increase online enrollment, growing resources that will support the on-campus experience, while simultaneously serving new student populations – especially working adults who are looking to add or complete a degree.

Integration will enable us to share services and to work together to recruit, retain and graduate students, rather than compete with each other in a crowded higher education market.

An inclusive and transparent process

The Western Integration planning has been both inclusive – involving more 425 students, faculty, staff, alumni and other volunteers – and transparent. Updates have been provided in an ongoing way via a multitude of communications channels, from websites to social media to email, as well as via virtual gatherings.

A historic and significant move

The proposed integration is a historic and significant move, one that will no doubt be replicated by other public systems across the country and even some private institutions as the higher education sector continues to confront challenges and a dramatically changed landscape.

It has been a complex planning process and will no doubt bring change to our institutions. Here are some key takeaways from the integration plan:

- **Large-scale layoffs are NOT part of the plan.** Workforce reductions will occur gradually, over time, many through retirement incentives, normal attrition and non-replacement of positions. Regardless of integration, we are committed to financial sustainability; this includes aligning costs with revenues.
- **Edinboro, Clarion and California are not closing.** Students will continue to live on our campuses and in our communities, and they will participate in a traditional on-campus experience.
- **Edinboro, Clarion and California are not moving totally online.**
- **Athletics will continue. We will remain the Edinboro Fighting Scots, Clarion Golden Eagles and California Vulcans.**

Finally, if the proposed integration is approved in July, Edinboro, Clarion and California will work together to build a **strong and sustainable future** that will serve students for decades to come. We will grow not shrink; we will not merely survive but we will thrive in future generations.