

***Penn State Forward***

# **EDUCATIONAL EQUITY PLATFORM**

Last modified April 10th, 2022

***Draft***

## About Penn State Forward

Penn State Forward is a group of students and young alumni supporting three young, forward-thinking candidates for the Penn State Board of Trustees in the 2022 Alumni Trustee Election: **Dr. Christa Hasenkopf**, **Dr. Edward Smith**, and **Dr. Farnaz Farhi**. The Penn State Forward platform includes commitments and initiatives to advance climate action, educational equity, student safety, and transparent governance at Penn State.

## Candidate Biographies

**Dr. Christa Hasenkopf** is an atmospheric scientist who has focused her professional career on helping communities act on the severe public health and climate consequences of burning fossil fuels. Christa's experiences as a first-generation college student motivate her to address equity issues at Penn State. She serves as a first-generation college student mentor and previously led an [email writing campaign](#) to address racial diversity issues within the Schreyer Honors College. She is excited to bring this background to Penn State's Board of Trustees and push for change to create a more equitable Penn State.

**Dr. Ed Smith** is a former Black Caucus president who built coalitions to fight for a just, safe and culturally inclusive campus. As the co-chair of Kresge Foundation's Equity Task Force, Ed works to promote college opportunity and degree completion for marginalized student groups. His work is informed by over a decade of work in educational policy research focusing on educational attainment initiatives — expertise that he will bring to the Board of Trustees as it helps him ensure that all students, regardless of background, can succeed at Penn State.

**Dr. Farnaz Farhi** is an OBGYN who has spent 15 years studying sexual violence and caring for its victims and survivors. Farnaz's expertise in health equity enables her to tackle equity issues that exist at Penn State, especially those that pertain to medical care and unequal health and wellbeing outcomes. Farnaz is part of the Anti-Racism Coalition at George Washington University, where she works, and leads medical research that studies unequal health outcomes amongst mothers of different races; she is also committed to caring for the LGBTQ+ community and addressing structural medical disparities.

**All Penn State alumni or former degree-program students are eligible to vote in the alumni trustee election by following instructions at [psuforward.org/vote](https://psuforward.org/vote). All Penn State alumni or former degree-program students are eligible to vote in the alumni trustee election, which will take place from April 10th, 2022 to May 5th, 2022 at 9 AM EST.**

## Platform Modifications

This platform has been created after a review of existing research about Penn State's practices and extensive conversations with students, staff, faculty, and alumni. In alignment with our desire to move Penn State forward, we welcome suggestions at [team@psuforward.org](mailto:team@psuforward.org). And in alignment with our fourth pillar — transparent governance — we will note platform modifications and our rationale on our last page.

## Executive Summary

We envision a university where all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, sexual identity, or intersectional background, experience the opportunity and resources needed to thrive. We believe that equity at Penn State means developing, implementing, and evaluating sustainable solutions to address the systemic barriers marginalized students face and creating campus structures that reflect their histories, futures, and lived experiences.

As trustees, we will advocate for institutional practices and investments that eliminate disparities in academic achievement, social engagement, financial support, and health and wellness across racial groups, socioeconomic strata, and ability status. Moreover, shared governance is a foundational theme of our campaign; we will push institutional leaders to transform Penn State's campuses to promote cultural awareness, dismantle all forms of hate, bigotry, and bias, and foster collaboration among campus stakeholders. This will ultimately promote inclusive decision-making and prepare students to work and live in a globally connected environment once they graduate.

When Penn State works toward equity, it ensures that all students experience the support they need to succeed. This can improve the educational experience, lead to higher satisfaction and engagement, and increase graduation rates.

Educational equity is a core pillar of the Penn State Forward platform. We believe it is necessary for achieving Penn State's mission to provide unparalleled access to education and public service to support the residents of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and beyond. Accordingly, as members of the Board of Trustees, we will push for the following:

1. Implement key equity recommendations originating from Penn State's task forces, academic departments, and student organizations
  - a. Increase financial support (scholarships, aid, wages) to Penn State students, lower the cost of attendance and provide cost-effective solutions to student poverty
  - b. Promote inclusive health and holistic wellness practices, with a focus on queer and trans and racially minoritized students, and survivors of violence
  - c. Build the infrastructure to affirm student voices in campus administration and decision-making
2. Create a formal protocol for the submission, review, and acceptance of equity-focused recommendations to increase transparency and community engagement
3. Proactively identify and rectify inequalities by leveraging data, increasing equity-centric research, and collaborating with peer institutions

## Background

Many groups of students, including women, BIPOC students, LGBTQ students, students with disabilities, veteran students and adult learners, commonwealth campus students, students

experiencing poverty or from families with limited income, and international students face specific challenges.

Students experiencing poverty or from families with limited income may struggle to pay rent and afford textbooks, even while working a part-time job; women and LGBTQ+ students face interpersonal violence and harassment at significantly higher rates than men and their cisgender and straight peers; BIPOC students face similar heightened levels of violence and harassment, and are also more likely to experience food and housing insecurity, perhaps due to national discrepancies in income-driven by the generational wealth gap; international students often struggle with language and cultural barriers, with less institutional support than their domestic peers. And these are just a few examples.

Our policy platform is based on the previous intellectual work undertaken by Penn State's community experts; undergirding it is the idea that we should listen to and review what has already been recommended and increase avenues for further recommendations and critical thought.

To understand community interests and issues regarding educational equity, the Penn State Forward team reviewed the recommendations formulated by task forces, commissions, academic departments, student organizations, and student governments over the last 10 years, including:

- The President's Commission on LGBTQ Equity's "Updates and Recommendations based upon the Community Survey and Ongoing Initiatives"
- The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA)'s, Resolution #71-01, "Addressing the Safety of Our Trans Community at Penn State"
- The University Park Undergraduate Association (UPUA)'s, Resolution #14-16, "In Support of Improving Gender Inclusive Housing and Open Housing" (October 2021)
- Dr. Gary King and Dr. Darryl Thomas, on behalf of concerned Black faculty at Penn State University, "More Rivers to Cross" Report
- Penn State's Department of African American Studies, University Park, "How We Can Make Black Lives at Penn State Matter, An Open Letter to President Eric J. Barron"
- The Select Penn State Presidential Commission on Racism, Bias, and Community Safety's recommendations
- The Student Code of Conduct Task Force's recommendations
- Penn State's Food and Housing Security Task Force's report (February 2021)
- Coalition for a Just University's "Bunsis Executive Report" (April 2021)
- The GPSA's Resolution #70-28, "Disability Accommodations"
- Penn State Access Club's recommendations, from the Penn State News article, "Access Club seeks to improve accessibility, create a more inclusive environment" (January 2021)

The key themes and issues that emerged from this review are outlined below. These are the issues that we will prioritize as members of the Penn State Board of Trustees.

A significant amount of research on LGBTQ+ equity issues and racism (particularly anti-Black racism) has been conducted, but there's limited information about other inequities in our community — for instance, the unique barriers that disabled students, international students, veteran and/or adult students, and Commonwealth students face. Institutional decision-makers must proactively seek them in collaboration with student groups, including through data collection to better understand these inequities and begin to rectify them.

## Key Equity Recommendations

- Increase financial support (scholarships, aid, wages) to Penn State students, lower the cost of attendance and provide cost-effective solutions to student poverty
- Promote inclusive health and holistic wellness practices, with a focus on queer and trans and racially minoritized students, and survivors of violence
- Build the infrastructure to affirm student voices in campus administration and decision-making

### *Increase financial support to Penn State students*

Institutional decision-makers have implied that Penn State is strapped for cash and thus cannot support students experiencing poverty and cannot reduce the cost of attendance. But analysis completed by an external financial auditor, hired by Penn State's Coalition for a Just University, revealed that this, in fact, is not the case.<sup>1</sup> The auditor presented findings that demonstrated that the institution is doing quite well financially: Penn State's reserves total over \$4 billion and the University's revenue has consistently been higher than expenses.<sup>2</sup> Penn State decision-makers have likely overstated financial losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Penn State, when compared to peer institutions, provides less financial aid and scholarships with a higher sticker cost, despite the financial status of the university.<sup>4</sup>

Current efforts addressing student poverty focus on student volunteerism and student philanthropy. The Lion's Pantry is almost entirely run by student volunteers. Students are asked to donate their money to help students in need.<sup>5</sup> Factors that the Penn State controls all contribute substantially to student poverty — like high tuition, low stipends, low wages, and many other factors. Our peer institution Rutgers, on the other hand, are providing free tuition to undergrads from low-income families — a systemic, structural solution to student

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<sup>1</sup> Coalition for a Just University, "CJU Executive Summary of Bunsis Presentation," Coalition for a Just University, 2021, <https://cjupsu.org/bunsis-executive-report>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Penn State News, "Penn State encourages students to 'Swipe Out Hunger' from Nov. 13-21," Penn State News, November 8, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/story/penn-state-encourages-students-swipe-out-hunger-nov-13-21/>.

poverty.<sup>6</sup> Students deserve solutions that interrogate the root causes of student poverty and address it holistically; students and their families deserve solutions that are data- and research-driven. We believe that student poverty at Penn State “is not the result of a lack of resources,” it is “the result of a misrepresentation of the nature, causes, and solutions to poverty” — it is because the causes of student poverty and thus the proposed solutions are defined in a way that is “consistent with... preferred policy strategies,”<sup>7</sup> not accurately.

Research has demonstrated that cost-effective support for those experiencing poverty provides direct support to those who need it.<sup>8</sup> Our approach will operate in concert with this research and also acknowledges the need to eliminate structural barriers to necessary resource and promote university transparency. We will support:

- Lower tuition and increased aid and scholarships<sup>9</sup>
- Increased wages for student workers
- An analysis of cost-of-living across Penn State campuses and groups and partnerships with local governments to lower the cost and increase access to services (medical, food, rent, etc.)
- Increase transparency about cost-of-attendance, in accordance with leading expert recommendations, including by...
  - “Clarify financial aid letters by distinguishing loans from grants and scholarships, noting that loans must be paid back, and clearly stating net costs.
  - Provide students with a four-year estimate of expected costs.
  - Establish clear policies regarding financial aid eligibility requirements, and include them in all financial aid award letters and communications.
  - Establish more robust methods for estimating nontuition costs to provide students with more accurate information.
  - Educate students about financial aid by requiring or encouraging financial aid advising.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sophie Nieto-Munoz, “Rutgers to provide free tuition to undergrads from low-income families,” February 21, 2022,

<https://newjerseymonitor.com/briefs/rutgers-to-provide-free-tuition-to-undergrads-from-low-income-families/?fbclid=IwAR1QgAHHNJiesvriL4Rc1wSe8uvicyldcsrnoE0UCZ43C0wX2WkZCjQBGBU>

<sup>7</sup> Mark R. Rank, “Toward a New Understanding of American Poverty,” Washington University in St. Louis Journal of Law & Policy 20, no. 17 (2006):

[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law\\_journal\\_law\\_policy/vol20/iss1/3](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol20/iss1/3).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Kenny, “Give Poor People Cash,” The Atlantic, September 25, 2015,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/welfare-reform-direct-cash-poor/407236/>

<sup>9</sup> Savings can be accomplished in myriad ways, including eliminating not cost-effective solutions to equity issues and replacing them with cost-effective solutions (like direct support); eliminating unnecessary administrative structures, better management of the University investments, and support increasing the annual spending target on income from invested assets, from 4.5% to 5% of the LTIP’s five-year average market value (as outlined in the “transparent governance” pillar of our platform).

<sup>10</sup> For leading recommendations, see Crystal Coker and Jennifer Glynn, “Making College Affordable: Providing Low-Income Students with the Knowledge and Resources Needed to Pay for College,” Jack Kent Cooke Foundation,

<https://www.jkcf.org/research/making-college-affordable-providing-low-income-students-with-the-knowledge-and-resources-needed-to-pay-for-college/>.

### *Promote inclusive health and holistic wellness practices*

- Establish a robust recruitment and retention strategy for mental health and wellness professionals from diverse demographic backgrounds, presenting varied wellness and clinical options for all students (recommendation #6 from African American Studies letter, #3 - 5 from GPSA).
- Integrate standards of gender inclusivity and human dignity by supporting the gender-informed and trauma-informed care healthcare processes
- In alignment with Dr. Farhi's expertise and our "student safety" platform, assess current practices for medical care for survivors of violence and transparently implement changes

### *Build the infrastructure to affirm student voices*

- Protect public funding for campus-based diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work from external attempts to defund/withdraw financial support. This work is critically important and positively affects student success – states and campuses should be investing MORE public dollars into this work.
- Reform the General Education requirement for undergraduate students to focus more explicitly on educating all students about historic and current forms of racism, racial violence, and transformative justice (recommendation #3 from African American Studies letter).
- Increase faculty from underrepresented backgrounds by investing in the recruitment and retention of faculty in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) & African American Studies Departments and increasing recognition and compensation for student mentorship. Protect tenure status and privileges from external assaults.
- Adopt and implement universal design standards for technology used in all course and campus environments, as well as public-facing media (e.g., websites, course management tools, library catalogs, online courses, ticketing, and registration systems). Technology should be adaptive and deployed to be equally integrated into all academic and co-curricular settings and effective for all learners.
- Honor emergent, ADA-compliant definitions, and accommodations for all learners and residents in Penn State housing, including structural and physical accommodations.

## **Protocol**

Our equity work will be continuous. We will establish a mechanism (committee/council/unit) to take stock of and help implement recommendations from past task forces, committees, and presidential councils.

Moving forward, we are committed to fostering sustained dialogue between students, senior administrators, and Board members in student-hosted environments, in alignment with recommendations from the President's Commission on LGBTQ+ Equity, and the Select Penn State Presidential Commission on Racism, Bias, and Community Safety. We will document

community recommendations in addition to proactively identifying and rectifying inequalities by leveraging data, increasing equity-centric research, and collaborating with peer institutions.

Further, we will create a formal protocol for the submission, review, and acceptance of equity-focused recommendations to increase transparency and community engagement. This protocol will be created with the feedback of various Penn State communities, including students, staff, faculty, and family, and published with a process for annual review.