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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Wage Disparity in Higher Education

Wednesday, March 25, 2026 | 8:15 a.m.

OPENING REMARKS

8:15 a.m. Welcome + Member Introductions

PANEL ONE

8:20 a.m. James Howell, Ph.D., Associate Teaching Professor, Biochemistry
Penn State University Park

Julio Palma, Ph.D., Researcher, Professor of Chemistry
Penn State Fayette

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL TWO

8:50 a.m. Jennifer Wilkes, Vice President for Human Resources
Penn State University

Q & A with Legislators



Testimony of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 668

Presented to the
Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee

Hearing on Wednesday, March 25, 2026

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF PENN STATE FACULTY
Submitted to the House Democratic Policy Committee

Good morning, Chairman Bizzarro and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee.

On behalf of our organization, we want to thank you for holding this hearing and for your continued leadership on issues affecting higher education across the Commonwealth. We appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Penn State faculty and the work they are doing to strengthen both their profession and student outcomes.

We approach this conversation with optimism. What we are seeing at Penn State is not a breakdown. It is engagement. Faculty are stepping forward, collectively, to invest in the long-term success of their institution and their students.

Why Faculty Are Organizing Now

Penn State faculty organizing is part of a broader national movement across higher education. Faculty, graduate workers, and staff across the country are increasingly seeking a stronger voice in shaping the institutions they serve.

At Penn State, thousands of faculty have moved forward with an organizing effort that has reached a formal election stage this year. This reflects not only momentum but a shared recognition that faculty want a structured, constructive role in decisions that affect teaching, research, and campus life.

This moment follows similar developments among Penn State graduate student workers, who recently organized and voted to form a union. That effort was driven by concerns about compensation, workload, and stability, mirroring trends at universities nationwide, where graduate workers are balancing instructional responsibilities with rising living costs.

Taken together, these developments point to something important: across roles, individuals who contribute directly to the academic mission are seeking a more consistent and transparent partnership with institutional leadership.

Why Wages Are Central

While faculty organizing touches on many issues, wages are central, and for good reason.

Faculty compensation at Penn State has not kept pace with peer institutions in the Big Ten. According to federal IPEDS salary data, Penn State ranks near the bottom of Big Ten universities in several faculty pay categories, including 11th for full professors and 15th for lecturers.¹

At the same time, compensation for top administrators and athletics leadership has grown significantly, with multiple individuals earning well over \$500,000 annually and some exceeding \$1 million.²

Faculty are not raising these points to create division, but to ask a reasonable question about alignment: how can compensation and investment better reflect the university's academic mission?

National research provides further context. Faculty at unionized institutions earn, on average, higher salaries than those at comparable non-union institutions, with some studies showing differences of approximately 18 percent.³

This helps explain why faculty across the country, including at Penn State, are turning to collective bargaining as a practical, proven tool.

Why Wages Matter for Students

We want to be clear that this conversation is not only about faculty. It is about students.

Compensation directly shapes the educational environment.

When faculty are underpaid or face instability, turnover increases. Faculty leave for more stable opportunities, disrupting programs and undermining student continuity.

Faculty who are financially stretched are also more likely to take on additional work outside the classroom, limiting the time they can devote to mentoring, advising, and supporting students.

Over time, these pressures make it harder to recruit and retain high-quality educators, thereby directly affecting instructional quality.

The reverse is also true. When faculty are supported and fairly compensated, they are more available to students, more invested in their institutions, and more likely to remain in place long enough to build meaningful academic relationships.

Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions.

A Broader Conversation About Priorities

Faculty organizing is also taking place alongside broader institutional decisions that have raised important questions.

Penn State is currently considering structural changes to its Commonwealth Campus system, including potential closures that would impact students and local economies across

Pennsylvania.⁴ These campuses serve as critical access points, particularly for rural and first-generation students.

At the same time, the university has committed to large-scale capital projects, including a \$700 million renovation of Beaver Stadium and tens of millions of dollars in additional upgrades to athletics facilities.⁵

Penn State's endowment and long-term investment pool together total billions of dollars, with non-endowment funds available to support operations and institutional priorities.⁶

These facts have led faculty and stakeholders to ask how resources can best be aligned with the university's core mission of teaching, research, and public service.

These are constructive questions that reflect a deep investment in the institution's future.

A Constructive Path Forward

Collective bargaining offers a path forward grounded in structure and partnership.

It creates a consistent framework for dialogue between faculty and administration. It ensures that decisions affecting teaching and learning include input from those closest to the work. And it provides transparency through clear, enforceable agreements.

Across the country, universities with faculty unions continue to succeed as leading research and teaching institutions. Collective bargaining is not a departure from excellence. It is often a tool that helps sustain it.

Conclusion

Penn State is a cornerstone institution for the Commonwealth. Its strength is directly tied to the strength of its faculty and the success of its students.

Faculty are organizing because they are committed to that success. They are seeking a stronger voice, fair compensation, and a more stable foundation for the work they do every day.

We believe that supporting faculty in this effort is consistent with Pennsylvania's broader goals: strong institutions, strong students, and strong communities.

Thank you again to Chairman Bizzarro and the members of the Committee for your leadership and for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Footnotes

1. IPEDS Big Ten Salary Data, 2023.

2. Pennsylvania State University, Right-to-Know Law Report, May 30, 2025.
3. National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, “The State of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education,” 2023.
4. Pennsylvania State University, “Future State Recommendation: Commonwealth Campus Ecosystem,” Executive Summary.
5. Centre Daily Times, “A \$700M vision: 8 key updates on Penn State’s Beaver Stadium construction,” May 12, 2025; Penn State Board of Trustees materials on athletics facility projects, 2023–2025.
6. Pennsylvania State University, Investment Reports and Endowment Summaries, 2024.

Bibliography

<citations>

Pennsylvania General Assembly
House Democratic Policy Committee
Testimony of Jennifer Wilkes, Vice President for Human Resources
The Pennsylvania State University
March 25, 2026

Good morning, Chair Bizzarro and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. Thank you for inviting us to speak with you today on behalf of Penn State to answer questions related to its operations and its workforce. We are always available to discuss this testimony or any issues pertaining to Penn State.

My name is Jennifer Wilkes, and I am Penn State's vice president for Human Resources and chief human resources officer, a position I have held for four years. However, I've been part of Penn State for more than two decades serving in a range of HR and employee relations roles and partnering with colleagues across the university to help advance Penn State's mission. I'm here with Kathy Bieschke, senior vice provost. Kathy oversees the Offices of Undergraduate Education and Faculty Affairs. She is a professor of education and began her career at Penn State in 1991. We are both deeply committed to the success of all our Penn State employees.

As the Commonwealth's sole land-grant institution, Penn State's mission is more expansive than any other college or university in Pennsylvania. We educate more than 86,000 students, conduct world-class research, provide agricultural extension education services in all 67 counties, deliver life-saving healthcare through Penn State Health, and engage in public service and community outreach. A recent independent study showed Penn State contributes \$15.8 billion annually to the state's economy, supporting 109,750 jobs throughout the state.

It is worth noting that despite our wide-reaching mission and complex structure, the commonwealth's per-in-state-student investment in Penn State ranks last in Pennsylvania and far below the national average. The state's investment in our Pennsylvania students

has not increased since 2019 even as costs rise. This reflects a longer-term trend: Penn State's general support appropriation was larger in 2000 (\$242.9 million) than it is today (\$242.1 million). If those dollars had kept pace with inflation over the last quarter century, our general support funding would now exceed \$450 million.

I share these figures because they are the backdrop for a broader conversation about the challenges facing Penn State and higher education overall. We acknowledge that the University has needed to make a lot of tough decisions over the past few years to position the institution and our students, faculty, and staff for long-term success and sustainability. We continue to move at a fast but thoughtful and deliberate pace to prepare the University for the future, as we navigate rising operating costs and financial pressures, growing expectations for affordability and access, profound demographic shifts, and years of stagnant state funding.

Penn State is a complex academic enterprise. In fall 2025, Penn State had a workforce of 20,376 full-time employees and 16,183 part-time employees. Our nearly 7,500 faculty (6,028 full-time and 1,470 part-time) alone represent an enormous range of roles and responsibilities. Faculty are defined by tenure status, research expectations, teaching focus, and full- and part-time status — a structure that reflects the full breadth of what a major research university does, encompassing assistant, associate, and full professors, alongside lecturers; research, teaching, and clinical faculty; professors of practice and adjuncts. Serving students and advancing knowledge at the highest level requires a university to have the ability to respond to these differences. Penn State competes nationally for faculty talent and sponsored research funding, and succeeding on both fronts requires flexibility in structuring roles and commitments.

When you ask people to work within a large, decentralized institution with varying expectations and structures, there is an obligation on the part of an employer to help them develop their capabilities to the fullest and build rewarding careers. For faculty and staff,

we have focused on providing opportunities for professional growth and advancement that will add to their long-term success. We also remain committed to providing competitive pay, excellent benefits and flexible work arrangements. These investments reflect our strong desire to be an employer of choice across the Commonwealth, and the numbers bear that out. For example:

- In 2023, Penn State launched a new market-informed salary structure for staff employees and made a historic \$60 million investment in staff salaries, keeping us competitive and strengthening our ability to attract and retain talent. In 2025, the university invested more than \$50 million to provide annual salary increases for eligible faculty and staff.
- Last year, we received more than 124,000 applications for open full-time positions and our employee turnover rate stands at a low of around 8%.
- The health and well-being of all our valued employees and their families continue to be top priorities for us, which is why Penn State offers a comprehensive benefits package. The university pays 75% of employee health care costs, and last year we added three new optional insurance benefits and introduced two no-cost health services — a virtual physical therapy and exercise program and a prescription savings service. We doubled the amount of family sick time employees can use, from 40 to 80 hours per year, and our overall package includes substantial paid vacation, retirement contributions and a 75% tuition discount for employees and their dependents.

We are also working to attract and retain faculty in several ways including — but not limited to — targeted seed grants, competitive retention packages, equipment and resource investments and faculty recognition.

- Penn State announced more than \$10 million in support for faculty promotions across the FY2024-25 and 2025-26 budgets and additional support for new professional development programming for non-tenure-line faculty.

- In fall 2025, we launched the Center for Faculty Development and Advancement, a hub for professional development in teaching, mentorship, research and leadership. The University also awarded 117 grants totaling more than \$1.5 million to non-tenure-line teaching, clinical and research faculty for personal professional development opportunities.
- We worked alongside the Faculty Senate to develop workload guidance for academic units, and we expanded parental leave for faculty to provide both parents with six weeks of paid leave and a one-semester release from teaching responsibilities. Non-tenure-line faculty now have a defined promotion process with an 8% salary increase, in line with peer institutions. Our phased retirement program, benchmarked against 28 peer institutions, is more generous than most — allowing faculty to reduce their workload over as long as a three-year period while retaining full-time benefits. And we are establishing a University Ombuds Office to give both faculty and staff a confidential resource for navigating workplace concerns.

We believe these efforts are being felt. In a recent job satisfaction survey among faculty across the University, the majority of respondents reported experiencing a rewarding professional environment at the departmental level. A smaller majority report being satisfied with Penn State as a place to work. The survey also identified a number of areas where we can do better, and we are in the midst of developing plans to address them because we want Penn State to be a place where faculty can cultivate impactful, rewarding careers.

Since the beginning of SEIU's faculty unionization efforts, we have committed to an open and respectful dialogue. We are grateful that the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board has set the election for this semester, and our actions have demonstrated that we want to work with the Penn State Faculty Alliance and the SEIU throughout this process. For example, we worked collaboratively to define the bargaining unit and quickly came to agreement on the terms of its membership. I also want to proactively address President Bendapudi's comments at the House Appropriations Committee hearing and reiterate that we stand by

her commitment to not use any University funds or taxpayer dollars to discourage people from exercising their democratic right to join a union; and her commitment to not use resources on misinformation related to joining a union.

Starting this week and continuing through the beginning of the election period, we are holding six completely optional informational town halls for faculty. We know we will be asked about these town halls during today's hearing, so we want to level set by sharing Penn State's approach. Town hall meetings are standard (and frequent) practice at our institution. We commonly host these events when we receive or anticipate receiving many questions about various topics at the University. For instance, we've held town hall meetings on the University's new budget model, Commonwealth Campus closures, and changes at the federal level that impact the Penn State research enterprise. The union election town halls include a short presentation on the PLRB process, outline who is and who is not included in the collective bargaining unit and define terms that are important in the unionization process.

Penn State deeply values the contributions of our faculty, and the University's success as a leading research institution depends on their talent, dedication and expertise. This election represents an important moment, not only for faculty members, but for the entire Penn State community. Decisions like this will help shape the future of our institution and how we support our academic mission and research enterprise in the years ahead. As this process moves forward, Penn State remains committed to maintaining an open and respectful dialogue and continuing to provide information about the election so faculty can make informed decisions. Regardless of the outcome, we look forward to continuing to help our faculty thrive at Penn State.

Thank you for your time.