

APRIL 2024



WELCOME TO OUR

# Quarterly Newsletter



Welcome to the April edition of the PASSHE Foundation Newsletter! This month, we have inspiring stories, updates, and important introductions. We're thrilled to present the new members of the Foundation Board, share the remarkable journey of a Shippensburg University student, and feature the 2024 Ali Zaidi Award winner.

We also look closely at PASSHE's innovative work-based learning project and highlight the latest enhancements and changes surrounding the PASSHE Scholarship Program.

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## PASSHE FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE AND BOARD APPOINTMENTS

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Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) Foundation announced its incoming Executive Committee and new board appointments on March 20th.

### 2024 Officers/Executive Committee

- Chair: David Kerr—President of External Affairs of AT&T Pennsylvania, where he develops and implements AT&T's public policy and philanthropic initiatives in the Commonwealth. Kerr was previously the PASSHE Foundation Assistant Treasurer.
- Vice-Chair: Matt Steck—Owner and Partner at Greenlee Partners, LLC, a Harrisburg public affairs and lobbying firm. Steck was previously PASSHE Foundation vice chair.
- Treasurer: Gail D'Angelo—Senior Vice President, Regional CRA Manager for M&T Bank where she is responsible for compliance with the Community Reinvestment Act and directing more than \$3.5 million in charitable contributions and tax credit payments throughout the bank's seven Pennsylvania regions. D'Angelo continues her service to the Foundation in this role.
- Assistant Treasurer: Crystal Skotedis—Chief Financial Officer of Lane Enterprises Holdings, Inc., is responsible for overseeing the accounting, human resources, and information technology functions of the company, which operates 17 manufacturing plants in the United States.
- Secretary: Ashley Cook—Senior Vice President and Senior Philanthropic Specialist for Wells Fargo Philanthropic Services which helps individuals and families define and achieve their charitable objectives as part of their overall wealth plans.



*Foundation Chair Dave Kerr*

*“I am honored to be selected by my peers to lead the PASSHE Foundation Board, and grateful to our past Chair, Lynn Miller, for her extraordinary contribution to deepening our partnership with the State System,” said David Kerr, incoming Board Chair. “This is an exciting time for the Foundation and the State System to work with the business community to address Pennsylvania’s talent gap. I look forward to lending my support to those efforts.”*





## *Welcome to the foundation Linda Topoleski*

Linda is a strategic communications consultant with expertise in workforce development, higher education and stakeholder engagement in Pittsburgh. She was previously Vice President of Talent Strategy at the Allegheny Conference on Community Development where she was instrumental in the development of the landmark Inflection Point report which drove workforce strategy for the southwestern Pennsylvania region.

Linda holds a B.A. in Journalism from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She serves on the board of directors of Partner4Work and the Community College of Allegheny County Manufacturing Advisory Council. She is a past member of the Carnegie Science Center STEM Advisory Committee, the University of Pittsburgh School of Computing and Information Workforce Advisory Council, and the Remake Learning Council.

She has been recognized nationally and regionally with public relations and advertising industry awards, including the CIPRA (Creativity in Public Relations), the Edward L. Bernays Award for Excellence in Public Relations, the Public Relations Society of America-Pittsburgh Renaissance Awards, and ADDY Awards for her role in directing regional and national advertising programs.

# WELCOME SARA!

Work-based Project Manager Sara Holzer joined the PASSHE Foundation as the central point of contact for university and employer partners participating in the work-based learning pilot.

Sara brings extensive experience in community development from her tenure at the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, where she cultivated partnerships with a wide variety of stakeholders to drive talent attraction and retention efforts across the 10-county southwestern PA region. In her role, she led initiatives to engage employers on critical talent priorities and spearheaded a college student retention and engagement program in collaboration with regional universities. Sara's work provided valuable insights into students' decision-making processes regarding post-graduation living and employment choices. A passionate advocate for higher education and building a pipeline towards economic mobility, she is a proud PASSHE graduate from Shippensburg University. Sara resides in Pittsburgh with her husband and three children.



***“I’m thrilled to join the PASSHE Foundation team and contribute to the impactful work of launching a pilot initiative to increase work-based learning opportunities for university students. With the generous support of the Strada Education Foundation, this initiative will play a crucial role in bridging the access gap to work-based learning, ultimately empowering students for successful careers. I’m excited to work collaboratively with our state system institutions and anchor employers to achieve our objective of improving job prospects and economic mobility for students across Pennsylvania.”***

Sara Holzer



# State System Universities Launch Initiative with Major Employers to Expand Work-based Learning

BY KEVIN HENSIL  
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Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) and the PASSHE Foundation are launching a pilot initiative with major employers to significantly increase work-based learning that provides real-world experiences for PASSHE university students. Work-based learning, which includes integrating career competencies into campus employment, connecting students with employer-driven projects in the classroom, and broadening access to employer internships enhances a student's higher education and launches graduates into better jobs with higher incomes, positively impacting their long-term earnings and economic mobility.

Highmark Health is the initial partner employer, and PASSHE invites other statewide and regional employers to join the initiative. Strada Education Foundation awarded a \$750,000 grant to support the pilot project.

**“At Strada, our mission is to strengthen connections between education after high school and opportunity, with a focus on helping people who face the greatest challenges. PASSHE has delivered on its commitments to advancing social mobility, and we are pleased to partner with the State System through this investment,”** said Stephen Moret, president and CEO of Strada Education Foundation. **“Our research demonstrates the impact of work-based learning on student outcomes. We are delighted to support the State System in expanding students' participation in these opportunities.”**

The pilot includes five State System universities from different regions of Pennsylvania: Cheyney (southeast), Commonwealth (north central), East Stroudsburg (northeast), Slippery Rock (west), and Shippensburg (central). PASSHE intends to expand the initiative to all 10 State System universities after completing the pilot.

**“The State System is incredibly excited to partner with Highmark Health and the Strada Education Foundation on this innovative initiative,”** said PASSHE Chancellor Dan Greenstein. **“With 14 legacy campuses throughout the state, PASSHE is uniquely positioned to partner with employers in Pennsylvania. Together, we can connect classroom learning with real-work experiences and strategically build a better process for connecting students and employers. Ultimately, that will help launch more students into great careers and provide the workforce talent employers need.”**

The three-year pilot will reach more than 1,000 students, beginning in Fall 2024.

**“Highmark Health is proud to partner with PASSHE to support this initiative to combine classroom learning with work-based experiences for State System university students,”** said Dan Onorato, executive vice president, chief corporate affairs officer, Highmark Health. **“Our team members are transforming healthcare, and this collaboration will help us share that valuable experience with PASSHE students and meet skilled and motivated people who, after graduation, might join our world-class workforce.”**

## **Strong university and employer partnerships**

PASSHE will build the technological and academic infrastructure required to integrate work-based learning into students' classroom and campus experiences. Additionally, strategic partnerships and collaborations between universities and employers will create expanded and sustainable work-based learning opportunities for PASSHE students. The ultimate goals are two-fold: to enhance students' college experience and to deliver the workforce talent Pennsylvania's employers, including commonwealth agencies, need to thrive and grow.

**“Strong partnership between universities and employers can provide students with a tremendous experience that helps them learn and prepare for great careers in Pennsylvania,” said Shelley Scherer, president and CEO of the PASSHE Foundation. “We are thrilled to start this project with Highmark Health and are excited to build a network of state-wide employers to partner with PASSHE. Together, our students can learn valuable on-the-job skills and expand the college-to-career pipeline with the workforce talent our employers need to thrive and grow.”**

Universities will emphasize to students the importance of work-based learning as part of their higher education, expand opportunities for students to have those experiences, especially paid internships, and streamline the process for students. For example, the initiative will embed real-work experiences into the academic curriculum to broaden access and configure a shared online platform (Handshake) to help students identify opportunities that align with their career interests. Universities will also expand the regional network of participating employers and integrate work-based learning into on-campus work-study – an additional benefit for students using paid jobs to help fund their education.

Employers will explore how to streamline their recruitment and engagement of paid interns, partner with universities to create internships throughout the year, accommodate students’ class schedules, develop additional job-relevant instruction for interns, and, when possible, link paid internships to potential jobs after graduation.

### **Benefits of work-based learning**

Work-based learning, which can include internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing and more, allows students to connect their classroom education with technical and workplace skills and to develop professional connections and networks as part of their overall education. University students with high-quality, work-based learning, especially paid internships, have more confidence in their skills, are more likely to get higher-paying jobs after graduation, and are more satisfied with their education and career choices, according to findings by the Strada Education Foundation.

However, low-income, first-generation Black and Latino students and women are less likely to have paid internships, which can reduce their employability and income after graduation. To address the access gap, the pilot has a goal of 60% of students in the initiatives being low-income, first-generation or underrepresented minorities, which closely mirrors their representation among all PASSHE students.





# POWER AND PROMISE OF PASSHE

Chase Slenker was able to chart his own path at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania and take a financially responsible approach to reaching the finish line thanks to the scholarships he received from his university and the PASSHE Foundation.

BY ALICIA BRUMBACH  
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# Charting my own 'affordable' college path

Chase Slenker '23 '24  
Shippensburg University

When I was looking into colleges back in 2017, I started with the PASSHE schools first because I knew—even as a high school student—that I wanted a high-quality higher education at the most affordable cost.

Today, as I sit here as a soon-to-be graduate of both an undergraduate and a graduate program at Shippensburg University, I know I made the right choice.

Shippensburg has given me the opportunity to learn from highly experienced faculty and other academic professionals at a fraction of the cost of other schools. PASSHE has even had the same tuition for an unprecedented six consecutive years, which is longer than my entire college career. Admittedly, there's still more the state can do to make college more affordable and accessible for all. PASSHE is doing its part by providing scholarships that allow students to focus more on their education and less on what is in their wallet.

Continuing at Shippensburg for my MBA after completing my undergraduate degree in Supply Chain Management and Accounting was a no-brainer. In addition to its affordability, the program is accredited by AACSB International and has won numerous awards. Plus, I was already enrolled at the institution and was able to get started on my graduate courses during my last semester of undergrad, and that helped ease my transition to full-time graduate studies and a full-time career.



The scholarships I received from the PASSHE Foundation and Shippensburg University helped me throughout my entire higher education. As an undergrad, scholarships helped me pay for college without mountains of student loan debt and enabled me to focus more on my studies and co-curricular activities.

When I graduate in May with my MBA, I will be forever grateful for the opportunities Shippensburg and PASSHE have provided me and the thousands of other students who might not even have gone to college without an affordable option. The entire experience taught me so much about myself, the business world, and how to work well with others to be successful. I've been able to chart my own path and take a financially responsible approach to reaching the finish line.





# 2024 SYED R. ALI-ZAIDI AWARD FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Dr. Syed R. Ali-Zaidi was an esteemed member of Pennsylvania's State System Board of Governors and a strong advocate for the universities within the system. He established an award to inspire and honor State System students who excel in pursuing knowledge. This is the State System's most prestigious award for academic excellence and was made possible through an endowment established with the PASSHE Foundation.

Each of the ten State System Presidents nominates a student for the award. The State System Chancellor then selects the Ali-Zaidi Scholar from among the nominees. This year, **Rukayat Sulaiman** from Cheyney University was selected as the winner.



# The 2024 Syed R. Ali-Zaidi Award for Academic Excellence recognizes Rukayat's educational accomplishments at Cheyney University.

## Q&A WITH RUKAYAT SULAIMAN

### Where are you from?

My hometown is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

### Talk about your experience at Cheyney University?

My time at Cheyney has been truly enriching, spanning three and a half years filled with invaluable experiences. At Cheyney I am seen as a student not just a number and it has allowed me to grow personal relationships with my Cheyney community. Reflecting on my journey thus far, I am truly emotional and grateful.

### When did you know that you wanted to work in the legal field?

Since childhood, I've been drawn to the legal field, inspired by my own personal experiences and the portrayal of lawyers on television. The legal world sparked a deep desire within me to pursue a similar career path. As I entered college, I became increasingly motivated, realizing that with hard work and perseverance, my dreams could indeed become a reality.

### Can you tell us a little bit about the essay that you wrote for this award?

The essay I wrote for the award was rooted in my personal experiences and the driving force behind my aspiration to become an attorney. While I cannot definitively explain why my essay stood out among other applicants, I can affirm that I poured my heart and soul into its composition. With genuine passion and ambition, I embraced vulnerability in my writing, authentically responding to the prompt. Initially, I felt the weight of the prestigious award, which brought about a sense of pressure. However, I soon realized that what is meant for me will come to fruition, and I allowed myself to relax, trusting that my hard work would speak for itself. I submitted the essay with the confidence that I had given it my all, and regardless of the outcome, I felt immensely proud of myself for the effort I put forth and the opportunity to be considered for such an honor.



***“Making college affordable means guaranteeing everyone equal access to higher education without encountering financial obstacles.***

***Ensuring college affordability involves offering sufficient financial aid and scholarship options to students from various socioeconomic backgrounds.”***

*Rukayat Sulaiman*



### **Tell us about some your campus and community involvement?**

I am a leader and member of various campus and community organizations. Some of these organizations are:

- **White House HBCU Scholar:** This recognition signifies my commitment to academic excellence, allowing me to serve as a liaison for Cheyney University students seeking internships with government agencies or political organizations.
- **Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (Chapter President):** Serving as the Chapter President of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. highlights my leadership abilities and commitment to community service and sisterhood.
- **Cheyney University Honors Academy (Vice President):** As the Vice President of the Honors Academy, I play a key role in fostering academic excellence and promoting the values of scholarship, leadership, and service.
- **National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) CU Chapter, 2nd Vice President:** As the 2nd Vice President of the NCNW CU Chapter, I contribute to the organization's mission of empowering Black women and promoting social justice and equality.
- **Cheyney University Pre-Law Society (President):** As the President, I founded and wrote the constitution for the Pre-Law Society, fostering a community for students interested in pursuing legal careers and sharing resources available to me to help them attain this goal.
- **Resident Advisor:** I assumed the role of Resident Advisor during my second year at Cheyney and continue to do so because of my strong desire to support and uplift my community in any way possible.

I also like to volunteer wherever help is needed during the weekends or whenever I am available.

### **What are your plans after graduation?**

Upon graduation I plan to attend Law school. Presently, I have received acceptances from 4 law schools thus far, including The University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

### **How does it make you feel to be awarded the most prestigious award amongst the 10 PASSHE Universities?**

Being awarded the most prestigious award among the 10 PASSHE Universities fills me with immense pride and gratitude. It is a validation of my hard work and dedication, and it is an honor to be recognized in this manner. This achievement serves as a testament to the support and opportunities provided by my institution and community, and it motivates me to continue striving for excellence in all endeavors. Receiving such a huge recognition encourages me to further contribute positively to my community and to serve as a role model for others. Being awarded this prestigious award is a humbling and exhilarating experience that fuels my commitment to personal and academic growth.

# The PASSHE Scholarship Program for Commonwealth employees and their dependents is undergoing some changes!

## **Here's what's new**

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2023 PASSHE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM RECIPIENT  
STEPHANIE ONKST

## **Submit Applications for back-to-back semesters**

You now have the option to apply for consecutive semesters without any waiting period. This means that if you were awarded in the fall semester, you can apply again for the spring semester and receive the award two times during an academic year!

## **Program Extension**

The program has been extended until September 2026, instead of January 2025.

**The PASSHE Scholarship Program application period begins on June 3rd**

**To apply, visit [www.thepasshefoundation.com](http://www.thepasshefoundation.com)**