

# PSU is ready to adapt to a graying state

A RECENTLY published op-ed might have given readers the impression that Plymouth State University (PSU) “is in an uproar.” Absolutely nothing could be further from the truth. Below, I will attempt to explain why PSU is better-positioned than any other state-supported college in the country to deal with the enormous demographic shift in college-age students.

Plymouth State University faces financial and curriculum offering issues like those of other institutions of higher learning in states that do not receive an adequate amount of support from their respective state coffers. One need not look any further than Vermont (which ranks 49th above 50th-ranked University System of New Hampshire, of which PSU is a member, for public support from its state legislature) to see the issues that have resulted in closing at least one of their state colleges. States like Massachusetts, where legislators have committed enormous public resources to higher education, are offering free tuition to a larger cohort of students, many of which are the same students who, for a lot of reasons, might choose Plymouth State. Bottom line: it’s difficult to compete with *free*.

I wish to set the record straight regarding PSU having to reduce courses and faculty. There is a confluence of factors making it very difficult to continue to deliver public higher education as we have known it in the past. It is a fact that the state of New Hampshire contributes less funding to public higher education than any other state in the country. It is not my intent to debate the pros and cons of why our legislature chooses to contribute so little to higher education; this probably won’t change until voters decide to make it a ballot box issue. It is also a fact that the University System of New Hampshire is doing a great job educating its students. We are still able to offer programs that prepare our students for the jobs and careers that our state and nation need.

The reason I wish to speak specifically about Plymouth State is because that is where the current noise is. The entire University System of New Hampshire is working hard to deliver a great and much-needed product as efficiently and economically as possible. It is doing so even though there has been a dramatic decline in college-age stu-

dents throughout the nation, but particularly in a state as “gray” (present company included) as New Hampshire.



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The administration at PSU has done an amazing job of fortifying its academic programs with curricula and programs that are germane to the current needs of graduates — and employers. This may be one of the reasons why enrollment numbers this year look like certain programs are overperforming.

Naturally, when forced to examine budgets, leaders must examine programs in which fewer students are enrolling and make some difficult decisions. Administrators recognize that PSU can’t be everything to everyone; in today’s economic environment, no public institution can.

The good news is that Plymouth State University developed and employs a unique approach to teaching based on combining interdisciplinary subjects through its Cluster model. In so doing, PSU is much better positioned than other institutions to deal with shrinking enrollment. Many of the programs that fall under general studies and humanities can be woven into one of PSU’s integrated academic clusters. If not for this approach, it is likely that layoffs would otherwise have already been essential. This is not to say that there won’t be layoffs — it means that PSU will be less susceptible.

It is also worth reminding readers that this innovative learning model has been implemented at none other than the college that the Wall Street Journal featured on a front-page article in June 2017. In that article, the Journal emphasized that out of all the public colleges and universities in the nation, Plymouth State University delivered the best results when it came to improving critical thinking skills over four years.

The bottom line is that given the dramatic decline in college age-students, it is inevitable that cuts will need to be made. That is true throughout higher education. PSU will be able to significantly reduce the fallout by incorporating certain classes into its clusters. The positive economic impact of PSU faculty, students, and alumni on the state of New Hampshire far exceeds its investment, and it is worthy of additional attention and support.

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