



Friday April 29, 2021 • Volume 105, Issue Number 10 • An Independent, Student-Run Newspaper

the rocket

www.theonlinerocket.com

Allegation details emerge

Mohammadi opens up as PASSHE and SRU clamps down

By Joe Wells
News Editor

Mac Bell
Assistant News Editor

Nina Cipriani
Editor-in-Chief

The allegations that led to a forensic review of Slippery Rock University, which found no wrongdoing, came from inside SRU President William Behre's cabinet.

Two cabinet members were removed during the time the review was taking place. The Rocket has reached out to both former employees. Abbey Zink refused to comment on her dismissal.

But when asked, Amir Mohammadi confirmed he was the person who notified the Chancellor's Office of his concerns in a letter back in February.

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) Chancellor Dan Greenstein announced April 21 during his virtual chancellor's visit for SRU that a forensic review began shortly after PASSHE received the allegations. Greenstein added that the allegations were taken seriously and an outside firm was contracted to look into the issue.

Mohammadi characterized the information he relayed in his letter as a misrepresentation of data being presented to the state system, along with the true cost of certain programs.

The allegations made were focused on SRU's engineering department and the Comprehensive Planning Process (CPP) documents that the university submitted to the Chancellor's Office, according to Greenstein at the virtual visit.

The Rocket has asked for a copy of the review and its findings but has been denied by the state system, despite the chancellor telling the campus community on April

21 that the budget process is quite transparent.

After repeated denials for the document, The Rocket asked PASSHE for the specific reason that it was denying the release of the report to the public. According to the state system, the report and its findings are a personnel matter.

"As a matter of policy and out of respect for each employee's personal privacy, personnel matters are not shared beyond our office," Kevin Hensil, director of media relations at PASSHE, said in an email from Thursday.

The fiscal review was completed during the week of the chancellor's visit. According to Behre, SRU was notified that the review was completed on April 18. Two days later, on April 20, Behre and the university received the review.

"In both instances, no credible evidence was found of any wrongdoing," Greenstein said. "As far as I'm concerned, this matter is done."

At the virtual visit, Cindy LaCom, the gender studies director at SRU, told Greenstein and Behre that a lack of information from the university was creating gossip and concern in the community.

"If effective communication is part of good leadership, our concern is that we have received no information about any of this," LaCom said. "It's created a campus climate of alarm."

Behre responded that he did not plan to talk about the matter while the review was taking place.

"There was no way I was speaking about a review before the results came in because then everyone would say I'm trying to alter the results of the review," Behre said.

On the morning of April 20, the same day the university received the results of the review, university stakeholders, consisting of

"As a matter of policy and out of respect for each employee's personal privacy, personnel matters are not shared beyond our office."

— Kevin Hensil, director of media relations at PASSHE, on why SRU forensic review won't be released to the public

staff and faculty, received an 8 a.m. email from the Office of the President. It stated the cabinet level position of vice president for administration, global engagement and economic development—Mohammadi's position—was eliminated, effective immediately.

According to Mohammadi, roughly 15 minutes later, Behre walked into Mohammadi's office to tell him his position would be eliminated. He said he had no prior indication that the president planned to remove his position.

The Rocket asked Behre about the narrative Mohammadi provided about his dismissal, whether he knew Mohammadi had contacted the chancellor, when he made the decision to restructure his cabinet and whether Mohammadi's position was terminated because he shared his concerns with PASSHE.

"I will not comment on any specific person/personnel issue," Behre responded in an email Thursday.

Mohammadi is now the second member of Behre's cabinet to be removed. Weeks earlier, on April 4, the president sent out an email to faculty and staff that Provost Abbey Zink had been replaced by Michael Zieg, who would be filling the role as interim provost.

He explained that universities must balance their budget and work within certain parameters.

"So, some schools in order to balance their budget, decided they would assume a 2% retention increase for four years running," Behre said. "That's absurd."

Behre continued, telling the council that all of the universities have an absurdity in their CPPs. For SRU, this meant significant cuts to financial aid and zero dollars put aside for future facility projects.

Smith asked if the university was planning to cut aid, to which Behre said no.

"That was an exercise in arithmetic," he said.

Months later, after the review was completed, Behre said his description of how the university reached a balanced budget in its CPP was "a poor choice of words."

"I was frustrated that we were not permitted to submit a deficit CPP, with a narrative explanation of how we hoped to address the deficit in the coming months," Behre said in an email to The Rocket on Wednesday. "I believe that this method would have been a better planning tool."

As for the other universities, The Rocket reached out to all of the presidents of PASSHE universities and asked if their CPPs included these financial measures to reach a balanced budget. West Chester University forwarded our email to PASSHE.

Kutztown University said if the absurdity comment was made by Behre, it should be considered an "off-hand comment and not as an accounting principle."

"All projections are made with good intent based on the data available," Bryan Salvatore, director of communication for Kutztown said in an email.

No other PASSHE universities responded to our inquiry.

According to Hensil, there was a "misunderstanding" with the instructions of the

CPP only at SRU. Hensil added it is a normal practice for all the CPPs that are submitted to the Chancellor's Office to be reviewed by the university presidents, chief financial officers and chief academic officers.

"That collaborative review process worked as designed, and the miscommunication with SRU was addressed," Hensil said in an email.

As for the CPP that Slippery Rock submitted in September, the university projected major cuts in two areas: Student financial aid and transfers to the plant fund.

SRU's CPP shows a 33% cut to financial aid, a little more than \$2 million, during the 2022-2023 fiscal year and nearly \$1 million more the following year.

At the Trustees meeting in September, Behre assured Smith these cuts would not take place.

During that same two-year period, SRU eliminated the transfer to plant fund—money used for future projects—to zero.

In an email to The Rocket, Behre said the CPP is not updated after it is submitted but that it is used as a starting point to build out scenarios. He added that the university plans to present three different scenarios to the Council of Trustees during a financial workshop on May 3.

At the state system level, Greenstein said the CPPs are used to help in the appropriation requests process.

The collection of CPPs are used by the state system to help determine the financial need of budget requests at the state level.

"CPPs are critical," Greenstein said. "[CPPs] are the best visibility you have into where your universities are going [financially]."

SEE DOCUMENT PAGE A-3

ADMINISTRATIVE ALLEGATIONS TIMELINE

