



NEW JERSEY

# Association of State Colleges and Universities

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## The Higher Education Governance Issue in NJ Should Be a Non-Issue

March 2, 2018

NJASCU was asked to comment for the below article that appeared in the **PoliticoPro** subscription-only online media source. In addition to the NJASCU quotes that made it into the story, NJASCU would like to add the following:

*The governance issue in New Jersey is long-standing, going back to the demise of the Department of Higher Education in 1994. Many are predisposed to the notion that a more powerful office would make college more affordable and outcomes more productive. Yet, the proponents of the alleged good old days of a chancellor and department of higher education never present evidence of the benefits of a chancellor system, never provide comparative national data to indicate how governance affects college outcomes and accountability. Evidence provided by outside national experts at some of the nation's top think tanks, such as NCHEMS [National Center for Higher Education Management Systems](#) tend to dispel this view point, because it is a POLITICAL perspective, not one based on objective analysis. NJASCU institution presidents, speaking at the NJASCU Symposium on Higher Education in October 2017, all voiced opposition to reverting to a chancellor system of governance. They claim their schools have thrived under a system of more independence and autonomy. Dr. Harvey Kesselman, president of Stockton University, said "the public institutions all demonstrated how – without the chancellor system and with autonomy – they have thrived. Data show that the senior four-year public colleges and universities are strong, provide high quality education, are accessible, serve a very diverse population, and are an economic engine for their respective regions of the state. They have kept tuition and fees down in spite of drastically reduced state operating support."*

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### Will structure of higher education office hinder new secretary's effectiveness?

By Linh Tat

[www.PoliticoPro.com](http://www.PoliticoPro.com)

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Gov. Phil Murphy has tapped one of the nation's foremost experts on college affordability and accessibility to oversee his ambitious vision for higher education in New Jersey.

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But just how effective Zakiya Smith Ellis will be in overseeing the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education will depend in large part on the level of support she gets from the new Democratic administration.

One question Murphy will need to address is whether to increase the office's staff or make structural changes to ensure Smith Ellis, who begins her new role Monday, can carry out her tasks.

Chief among them will be the governor's plan for tuition-free community college. That won't happen overnight, but Murphy's selection of Smith Ellis is a clear signal he's not letting up on the idea.

"If there's anybody who can figure that out and can think through all the complicated moving pieces that are involved in something like [rolling out tuition-free college], Zakiya would absolutely be effective in leading that kind of an effort," said Bob Shireman, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a public policy research institute. Shireman previously worked with Smith Ellis and has known her for a decade.

Smith Ellis comes from the Lumina Foundation, the nation's largest private foundation focused on higher education. She has spent the past decade working on policies to bring college within reach of more students and was a senior policy adviser to the Department of Education and the White House during the Obama administration.

But while she comes with an impressive resume — including a spot on *Washingtonian* magazine's [40 Under 40](#) list last spring — some Trenton insiders wonder whether a lack of resources in the higher education office may hamper her ability to execute Murphy's agenda.

New Jersey used to have an entire department devoted to higher education. But in 1994, then-Gov. Christine Todd Whitman decentralized the system of four-year public colleges and universities, replacing the department with a Commission on Higher Education.

Gov. Chris Christie followed suit, replacing the commission with the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education in 2011.

The office has been described by some as a stripped-down version of the old department. The secretary still oversees statewide planning for higher education, including the development of a comprehensive master plan, and compiles data on individual colleges and universities. The secretary also decides a school's licensing or university status, approves certain academic programs or changes in a school's program mission and recommends the disbursement of capital bonds, among other duties.

But the office operates with a relatively skeletal crew, multiple people have told POLITICO.

That has raised concerns among some who, while stopping short of calling for the return of a Department of Higher Education, insist the state must provide more resources to the agency.

Gordon MacInnes, president of the left-leaning think tank New Jersey Policy Perspective, said there had been talks before Murphy became governor about whether the state should give the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education a boost by endowing it with certain responsibilities previously assigned to the Department of Higher Education.

“My guess would be that most people would want [the higher education office to be] more than what we have now but less than what was in place when there was a Department of Higher Education, with 200-plus staff people and very broad powers,” he said.

Assemblywoman Mila Jasey, who has also [questioned](#) whether the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education should revert to a department or some variation of it, said the state needs to provide more resources, regardless of which organizational structure Murphy adopts.

Pamela Hersh, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, which represents eight senior public institutions, said its members would oppose bringing back a department. Under that system, a chancellor who headed up the department had a hand in many more decisions, such as the selection of campus presidents and how much each school should charge for tuition.

Since the department was dissolved, colleges and universities have enjoyed greater autonomy — they’ve been able to determine their own curricula and programs, appoint their own presidents, set admissions standards and have final say over disputes concerning tenure and personnel, among other things.

“Bottom line, [the old department] was a system of much greater control and less autonomy for the individual colleges,” Hersh said in an email.

So far, there’s been no indication Murphy plans to revert the higher education office to a department. But as the rookie governor reimagines higher education in New Jersey, it’s possible he’ll look to somehow elevate the secretary’s position.

Smith Ellis did not respond to a request for an interview. The governor’s office also denied a request, suggesting that POLITICO reach out after she is confirmed by the Senate.

As legislators and policymakers prepare for Smith Ellis’ arrival, some weighed in on other issues they’d like the new secretary to take on.

Jasey said she hopes to work with Smith Ellis to draft a comprehensive strategic plan for higher education, while Senate Republican Leader Tom Kean Jr. said the office should establish its own system of review for assessing each institution’s performance.

The Century Foundation’s Shireman, who served with Smith Ellis on a federal education advisory panel before recruiting her to work in the Department of Education, predicts she will keep tabs on whether colleges and universities are providing quality programs that will

lead to gainful employment. The issue of quality has come up frequently at the Lumina Foundation, he said.

New Jerseyans also should expect the acting secretary to take interest in the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, the state agency that handles financial aid, Shireman said. HESAA fell under heavy scrutiny over the past year and a half following a [report](#) alleging predatory practices in collecting student loan repayments.

“It will be very helpful to New Jersey that she knows the [federal] financial aid program inside and out,” Shireman said. “She comes in knowing how the financial aid system works ... [and] how can we do a better job getting people the aid that they need and the information that they need at an earlier point in the process.”

The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities indicated it will look to Smith Ellis to develop a higher education school-funding “rationale” to justify how much state aid each institution should receive.

The state has been using a “historical funding” model that allocates money to colleges and universities based on the prior year’s funding levels, meaning aid has remained relatively flat despite increases in enrollment or other expenditures. Lawmakers in the past [have pressed](#) the secretary of higher education to recommend a funding rationale.

“NJASCU is pleased that the nominee for Secretary of Higher Education has excellent credentials and a wealth of knowledge in higher education,” Hersh said in a statement. “We certainly look forward to working with her to achieve increased state support for strengthening the already existing academic excellence, accessibility, and affordability of the state’s senior public colleges and universities.”