

Politico

Change in Montclair State's status may lead to changes for college association

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Montclair State University's recent recognition as a [public research university](#) by the state was heralded by many as a positive development, not only for the school but for the overall higher education landscape in New Jersey.

But the upgrade in status had perhaps one unintended consequence: Because it no longer falls under the category of a "state university," Montclair was removed from the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, as prescribed by the legislation, [NJ A4969 \(16R\)](#), establishing it as a public research institution.

While the school has chosen to remain an affiliated member, the difference in membership dues it now pays has left NJASCU with an unexpected financial shortfall which, in turn, is forcing the association to determine whether it needs to restructure.

Established as a nonprofit in 1985, NJASCU functions as a liaison between schools that are designated as "state colleges and universities" — the public, four-year schools that aren't considered research institutions — and policymakers and legislators in Trenton. Those seven schools are: The College of New Jersey, Ramapo College, and Kean, Stockton, Thomas Edison State, William Paterson and New Jersey City universities.

Formal membership give these institutions a vote on matters that the board takes up, such as the association's budget, its officers and its goals and objectives.

Its two affiliate members — Rowan and Montclair State universities, both of which had full membership status until they were redesignated as public research institutions — pay a heavily discounted rate to remain associated with NJASCU, though it does not enjoy voting rights.

Before it left NJASCU as a formal member, Montclair was expected to pay more than \$213,000 in annual membership dues, contributing to 16.5 percent of the association's total revenue from dues. That would have been the most of any of the nine schools associated with the organization, according to information provided by the association. Membership dues are proportional to the amount of state aid each institution receives, according to its bylaws.

But as an affiliated member, Montclair's expected contribution has fallen to \$50,000, or 4.5 percent of all dues collected.

NJASCU recently convened a special task force of its members to address the \$163,000 hit to its budget.

The association took a similar hit when Rowan University was redesignated a research institution. Like Montclair, Rowan decided to remain affiliated with NJASCU, with its dues dropping over time, from

\$184,400 in fiscal year 2015, to \$50,000 this year, said Michael Klein, the association's executive director.

"It's a serious issue," Klein said. "There are significant financial consequences to having, first Rowan, and now Montclair, becoming affiliated members. It does change our revenue picture quite a bit."

Stockton University president Harvey Kesselman, chair of the special task force, said the group will present its recommendation to the full board in September to address the budget shortfall. He declined to talk about the possibility of cutting staff, but said task force members are "going to look at everything."

NJASCU is staffed by an executive director, four other full-time employees and a part-time worker.

Beyond the immediate fiscal questions, Kesselman said the task force will consider broader issues, including a re-examination of the association's vision and mission, and said it may consider whether to expand its membership or downsize.

If the association wishes to fold in other universities as members, Kesselman said, "we could wind up being much stronger and bigger."

Such a change would require lawmakers to amend state statute.

Montclair State president Susan Cole, in an interview earlier this month, said the school chose to remain an affiliated member because it values the collaboration with other colleges and universities.

"New Jersey isn't a big state," she said. "There aren't that many four-year public institutions. Whether [or not] we're designated a research university, we all have a large commonality of interests."

While acknowledging the need to respond to changing times, Kesselman stressed the value of the association in advocating on behalf of member institutions. The association was intricately involved in pushing for the 2012 Building Our Future Bond Act, a voter-approved \$750 million bond referendum to finance higher education capital projects.

"Many of us are deeply committed to NJASCU," Kesselman said. "It has grown and evolved. And it has been a voice — our collective voice — over the years. But things have changed since it was first established, and our needs have changed as institutions."