

How to hold public hearings on Affordability of Public Higher Education

This guide can be adapted for any sort of public hearing related to public higher ed.

Define the issue.

- What is the hearing about? Affordability of Public Higher Education. The issue has to be narrow enough that it's a concrete problem that people can understand, and one that seems possible to solve – but broad enough that it matters to more than just one group and many people can speak to it from different perspectives.
- Collect data to demonstrate the problem, and collect written materials on the issue – newspaper articles, position papers, fact sheets, etc. Our Affordability Paper has a lot, but someone should also start collecting other materials. You will need this for a press packet and to educate the hearing board beforehand

Choose your hearing board.

- The hearing board is a panel of respected/prominent/prestigious members of the community. You need at least three such individuals to constitute a panel. The goal is to choose people whose opinions would have an impact on your target audience – the legislature, campus administrators, the public – and to get three or four people from different places. For example: well-known faculty members (not necessarily local), state senators or reps, clergy, business leaders, student government presidents. Make a list of ideal leaders for the board and work from there. PHENOM had talked about having PHENOM hear the testimony, rather than prominent people, but we should consider the pros and cons of both models.
- The hearing board should not include people who have a vested interest in the issue, i.e. someone whose job is on the line, or a leader of the union that is organizing around the issue. (Those people can and should testify, but not be on the panel.) The panel members should be perceived as fair and “neutral” – although it is obviously important to choose people who are sympathetic, articulate, passionate, and understand the issues.
- One of the panel should be designated “chair” of the hearing board – this person will call the hearing to order and invite testimony.
- Choose a date and time for the event that fits the schedule of the hearing board members.
- Let the board members know that their job will be to hear testimony, ask questions if they desire (not necessary), and make a brief statement after hearing the testimony, and sign on to a report which they don't have to actually write.

Plan the event.

- Make sure the hearing board members will be there.
- Figure out who should testify. Include representatives from as many different constituencies as possible – think about who is affected, directly or indirectly, by the affordability crisis: students, parents, local employers, social service providers .
- Think about the appropriate room for the event. You want a place that is easily accessible to media and to the audience. You don't want a room that is too big – much better to have a small room overflowing with people, than a hearing with lots of empty seats.
- The hearing board members should sit at a table at the front of the room. Provide a microphone and a podium for the speakers who will come up to speak one by one.

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- Do you want to provide food and drink?
- One or two people should be responsible for spotting press people and steering them to good spokespeople.
- The event should be relatively short – one hour ideally; 90 minutes at the most. You will start to lose your audience after that and the testimony loses its power if it goes on and on.

Line up testimony.

- Each speaker should prepare a very short statement – two or three minutes.
- The goal is to find people who can write short, compelling accounts of their personal experience. What does this issue mean to them? How does it impact their lives? What is an example that will make the issue vivid to the audience? What will be compelling to a wider public not as familiar with the details of the issue, or how universities work?
- Make a list of essential points that need to come out in testimony. Make sure you have at least one person to speak to each of these points – possibly more than one for the most important items. PHENOM should prepare the list of main points – see Affordability paper.
- Ask each speaker to give you their written testimony a few days before the hearing. See if all the relevant points are covered. Make sure no one is going on too long or saying things that won't play well with a general audience.
- Make a list of speakers in order. Make sure to start with a couple of very strong speakers – some media will leave after one or two speakers. End with a very strong speaker. In between, mix up different kinds of people with different perspectives.
- Keep it short. Plan for an hour. People will not stick to their time limits so it will always go longer than you plan. Limit the number of speakers as well as the length of their testimony, and be ruthless.
- If you don't have room for everyone who wants to testify, ask the others to submit written testimony that will be included in the final report.

Press/media- We want to do everything possible to get press.

- **Write a press release. Get help from people who write lots of press releases! Part of it could be standardized and written by PHENOM; the rest would be tailored to the individual hearing.**
- **Send out the release by email and fax a few days before the event. Make calls two days before the event to see if people are planning to come. You'll probably have to re-send all the press releases at this point. Make more calls the day before the event to make sure they have the release and are planning to come. Who knows local press people and can make personal contact?**
- **The press release needs enough information that a reporter could write a story from the release itself. Not everyone will come to the event but if you write a good release they can cover it anyway.**
- **Develop press packets for media who attend. These should include:**
 - **Fact sheets on the issues**
 - **Good newspaper articles on the issues – preferably from national news outlets**

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- A list of the hearing board members with brief bios
- A list of the people who are presenting testimony with identifying info (student, faculty, staff, position, university, etc.)
- Someone who made follow-up calls to media should be ready to talk to reporters at the hearing. If you see someone taking notes you should ask if they are media, introduce yourself, give them a press packet, and steer them to the best spokespeople on the issues. Be prepared to introduce them to someone who can answer their questions and make sure those people are prepared.
- Designate a few press spokespeople. They will be available and if a reporter wants to interview someone, everyone will know where to go.
- Keep your spokespeople on message. No matter what question the reporters ask, stick to the main points agreed upon before the event.

Turnout

- Make a list of all organizations whose members should attend and figure out who will contact each group and how they will publicize the event with their members. For each hearing, we would identify the set of colleges targeted for that hearing (knowing that the biggest turnout would be from the host campus)..
- Posters/flyers/materials for general turnout
- Target classes that would be likely to come – announce the hearing and/or get the professor to recommend that students attend.
- Get public service announcements in papers and radio – it is a public hearing.
- Invite administrators, legislators – even if they don't come you can say that everyone was invited to hear the testimony.
- The event organizers should commit to bringing people from their organizations, and get commitments from individuals who agree to attend.
- Everyone testifying should be encouraged to bring friends, family, coworkers.

The event itself

- The chair of the hearing board should introduce the hearing, explain why it is happening, and invite testimony. S/he or someone from PHENOM should say a few words about PHENOM, pass out post cards, point people to a PHENOM table.
- The speakers should have a list and know when it is their turn to speak. They should come up and give their testimony as soon as the previous speaker is done.
- The hearing board may ask questions at any time, but usually don't.
- After all testimony has been heard, the hearing board members should each make a statement about what they have heard and why it matters.
- The chair ends the hearing and announces that a written report will summarize the findings.
- Someone from PHENOM highlight the next PHENOM event (e.g. Lobby Day in April).

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Follow-up

- The hearing board should release a written report of the hearing. (It should be “signed” by the panel members but you can write the report and summaries for them.)
- The report should be divided up according to the key issues or perspectives. Provide quotes and examples from the testimony. Then draw conclusions and end with recommendations from the hearing board.
- Do another press release when the report is released – make the report available to media if they want to write about it.
- The report should go to legislators, press, administrations, unions, PHENOM, student governments, etc.

IMPORTANT TASKS

1. **overall coordination, make sure everything is getting done**
2. **arrange the room, sound, etc.**
3. **invite, coordinate the hearing panel**
4. **coordinate outreach and publicity**
5. **coordinate press releases and press calls**
6. **coordinate and collect testimony**
7. **write the report**
8. **speak on behalf of PHENOM**
9. **send out report**