

Diana Rodgers

Meeting Notes and Reflective Essay for Meeting with Dan Frankel

### Notes

- 23<sup>rd</sup> Legislative District-Allegheny County
- House Democratic Caucus Chair
- Notable Committees and Caucuses
  - LGBT Equality Caucus
  - Arts & Culture Caucus
  - Community College Caucus
- Interested in urban redevelopment
- Served as a commonwealth trustee for University of Pittsburgh
- Been in legislature since 1998

### Questions

- Your press releases and legislative history shows that you have a strong interest in advocating for the LGBTQIA community and the Jewish community among other minoritized groups especially in regard to hate crimes and hate speech. Would you be able to talk a little bit about your thoughts on how state-affiliated universities such as Pitt should handle hate speech from students and faculty? I am asking particularly in light of the recent news about the racist and anti-Semitic Group Me chat from the Pitt College Republicans.
- Public safety is a major concern for many universities, especially urban ones. You have promoted sensible gun control measures in the past, but what can university communities do to keep their students safe and to advocate for safer campuses? What programs should we, as graduate students about to meet with public safety at Pitt, ask about?
- In our previous class, we discussed the challenges faced by the state higher education system with regard to funding some of the smaller campuses. Are there ways for these institutions to partner with other regional institutions such as health care in order to remain sustainable?
- What are ways that colleges and universities can help advocate for their immigrant student and faculty in this political climate? What steps can HR offices take in order to best support visiting scholars and visa holders?
- Sexual assault and sexual harassment are very much in the news. How can colleges and universities assure that they take these allegations seriously while still following due process for investigations. Is this different at public and private institutions?
- What are ways that graduate students can advocate for better higher education funding?
- As a private practitioner with close professional ties to public higher education, how can I best advocate for strong funding for these institutions?

## Reflective Essay

Higher education does not exist in a vacuum. This was the recurrent theme of our conversation with Pennsylvania State Representative Dan Frankel on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 at his Squirrel Hill office. I had set up the meeting through his scheduler, Robin Ondo, and was joined by four of my colleagues. Representative Frankel was interested in our program and excited to talk with a group of students.

Representative Frankel has been representing the Pennsylvania 23<sup>rd</sup> District since 1998 and is upfront about his strong liberal *bona fides*. He has chaired the Democratic Caucus for several years and is a passionate advocate for the role of government in society. In that way, he faithfully represents his district. Our conversation began by Sarah's asking the Representative about the current state of higher education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Representative Frankel quickly identified the tension between our citizens' wanting a robust system of higher education and the employment and cultural benefits that accompany it, but also wanting lower income taxes which fund public universities. According to him, the situation is quite dire as the Republican-controlled State House regularly threatens appropriations that benefit both public and private higher education in our state. Frankel believes that many citizens do not understand the role of state and local government and that voters often conflate national and state issues at the ballot box, which leads to their wanting services and funding for public institutions, which include universities, but are swept up by the beliefs espoused by national politician about the brokenness of government. He encouraged us to engage more with local and state politicians and with our community in order to regularly make a case for the value of higher education and the necessity of supporting it.

Representative Frankel addressed the quandary faced by our system of higher education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that we discussed last semester with Dr. Garland. The demographics of Pennsylvania are shifting rapidly and we are seeing declining enrollment in state funded higher education. This has not affected the prestige institutions (Penn State, Pitt, and to a lesser degree, Temple), but it has been devastating to rural tier-2 and tier-3 institutions such as Edinboro and Mansfield. Representative Frankel understands the problem that this puts on the state budget. On the one hand, these institutions are often major employers in their region of low-skilled work such as cafeteria staff, grounds keeping, and janitorial staff, and of labor jobs including facilities management and maintenance. Further, these institutions guarantee the presence of highly educated citizens who serve as the college's professors and administrators and who have the social capital to effectively advocate for great public education and other social services in rural areas of our state. Shutting down a campus could be economically devastating to a region. However, if these campuses continue their trend of low enrollment, they become even more unsustainable. It seems likely that some campuses will have to close, according to Frankel, but this must be done in concert with local economic development initiatives to mitigate the damage.

Aside from funding, I asked about two cross-sectional issues with society and higher education. First, I was curious about some of the ways the colleges and universities are experiencing renewed hate speech and threatening conversations in the wake of the Charlottesville riots. Representative Frankel has served on several commissions about hate speech, particularly in regard to LGBTQIA+ and religious identities. While private institutions

have the ability to remove a student or group of students from the school for violating an institution's community standards, public institutions have to be sensitive to the free speech rights of their students. Frankel believes, however, that if we, as a Commonwealth, can pass hate speech and hate crime legislation, it will be easier for our public colleges and universities to adjudicate these issues. This is another way that Frankel advocates our getting involved in policy advocacy. Similarly, colleges are facing challenges about what to do about fire arms in states with fierce Second Amendment advocacy laws. Frankel, who stands for responsible gun control, believes that our advocacy at the state level about the danger of fire arms on our campus can help wary legislators see the importance of gun control.

Prior to our meeting, I was thinking about higher education as having a series of unique policy issues. Coming out of it, however, I realize that higher education, like any other public good or semi-public good, is deeply enmeshed with our culture wars and political disagreements of our larger society. To be a strong advocate for higher education is to be a productive citizen writ-large, and it is the responsibility of all informed Americans to regularly engage with their local, state, and national government in favor of positions that will increase safety and opportunity for all people.