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The following are his words and perspectives from a recent virtual interview, edited slightly for clarity and brevity.

Advocate Penn State (APS): Thank you for taking the time to speak to our advocates.
To begin, can you explain the state appropriation and why it matters for Penn State?

Mike Stefan (MS): Sure. Penn State's general appropriation from the Commonwealth is an annual allotment of funding we use to provide Pennsylvania resident students with in-state tuition – saving Pennsylvania students more than \$10,500 annually compared to their out of state peers.

We also receive funding for Agricultural research and extension, Pennsylvania College of Technology, and Penn State Health/the College of Medicine. The State's funding represents the deeply rooted partnership we have with the Commonwealth as the state's sole land grant institution.

APS: What effects has COVID-19 had on this year's budget cycle?

MS: COVID-19 has impacted our advocacy efforts in many ways. Most notably, all the normal interactions we have with legislators and staff have changed. Our ability to advocate in person has dramatically decreased; and, if you recall, last spring we had to cancel our largest single day advocacy effort – Advocate Penn State Capital Day. We now rely heavily on email communications to stay in contact with both the Governor's administration and legislative leadership to relay important information and to help the Commonwealth wherever possible.

Beyond the impact to our advocacy efforts, COVID-19 responses have caused significant hardships on individuals and communities. The need for social distancing and staying at home has had a dramatic effect on state revenue estimates. Current revenue projections predict a \$4.5 billion deficit.

Keep in mind, Penn State's annual appropriation was cut following the Great Recession by 24%, and frankly, we have not yet gotten back to the pre-cut funding levels. Currently, Penn State receives the same amount of funding as we received in 2006, and further funding cuts would put Penn State literally decades behind in state funding. That means we must do all we can, in whatever ways we can, to prevent or mitigate any additional cuts in our appropriation.

APS: It seems advocacy will be extremely important this year as the Commonwealth makes decisions on where to allocate funds in the face of lowered revenue.

Can you explain the steps in this year's budget cycle?

MS: Like all of 2020, this year's budget process has been anything but normal. With delayed tax deadlines and unknown revenue forecasts, the state legislature approved a 5-month budget. The remaining 7 months of the 2020-21 state budget are expected to be negotiated this November. Fortunately, education at all levels was flat funded for the entire fiscal year, allowing institutions like Penn State to prepare its 2020/21 academic year budget.

In addition to the work we must continue to do for the current budget, the process has already begun for next year's budget. The University has already submitted our 2021-22 budget request to the PA Department of Education, so the next step comes in February 2021, when the Governor will outline his budget priorities and spending plan. We must remain engaged to ensure that funding levels are not reduced due to the significant budget deficit.

APS: What happens if our funding is cut?

MS: As I often explain to legislators, Penn State is a complex university, but our sources of general fund revenue are not. To fund the educational mission of Penn State we rely on two main sources of funding: tuition revenue and the state's annual appropriation. A change in one can have an impact on the other.

In other words, there is a direct relationship between state funding and tuition. Penn State has received increases in state funding in four of the past five years and, as a result, Penn State has been able to keep tuition level for the last 3 years.

APS: We understand state funding is critical moving forward as we recognize the financial challenges that students and families are facing due to COVID-19 disruptions, and as we work to keep Penn State accessible and affordable. **How can Penn State supporters best advocate to the state legislature during these times?**

MS: Under normal circumstances grassroots advocacy is important, but in these uncharted times the importance of communicating to legislators - to explain the importance of our funding - has become vital.

It is important to keep yourself educated with all that [Penn State is doing to respond to the COVID crisis](#). Penn State has been committed to protecting our students, our employees, and the communities in which our campuses reside.

Second, take time to [review how Penn State utilizes state funding](#) and what it means for Pennsylvania.

Lastly, [take part in our advocacy campaigns](#) – contact your legislator and tell them why it is important to fund Penn State. We all have our own Penn State story and our own reason to love this University. Your voice and your story can help us impress upon legislators how important Penn State is to their constituents.

APS: Can you share your Penn State Story?

MS: As a former 2+2 student, attending both Penn State Altoona and University Park for my undergraduate degree, Penn State means so much to me. It has prepared me for my career and connected me to a network of professionals in and around our State Capitol that I can honestly say has contributed to my successes through the years.

Penn State is more than a university; it's a community that means a lot to my family. It is where we share so many great memories, whether it's tailgating on Saturdays, graduation ceremonies, or walks through the arboretum. For me, it's also where I met my wife for the first time, it's where we got engaged, and now it's where we raise our family. We love our Penn State Community.

APS: Thanks again for taking the time to speak with us and sharing more about how we can support the University in this new era. **Is there anything else you'd like to share?**

MS: Thank you for your help in advocating for Penn State. The funding we receive is so important to our mission and our current and future students.

We Are!
