

# Meet Pitt's new chancellor: She's ready 'to get to it and get the work done'

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University of Pittsburgh Chancellor Joan T.A. Gabel is now in her second week on the job. She said, "I'm looking forward to learning more and doing really good work on behalf of the university and on behalf of the commonwealth." Aimee Obidzinski/University of Pittsburgh



By

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Joan T.A. Gabel, in her second week on the job at the chancellor at the University of Pittsburgh, found herself in the midst of the university's critical decision-making over approving a budget and setting tuition without knowing what, if any, state financial support is forthcoming and whether any strings will come attached to it.

On Wednesday, the university [trustees approved a 2% increase at](#) its Oakland campus where the bulk of its more than 29,000 students attend and freeze the rate at its four regional campuses. They also approved a \$3 billion operating budget that includes pay raises for minimum wage workers and a pay pool for non-represented employees.

With the start of the 2023-24 academic year about a month away, Gabel said she felt it was important for students and their families to know the rate they will be asked to pay and for employees to be able to plan regarding their compensation.

Despite the financial dilemma surrounding Pitt's state funding, Gabel said she is excited and honored to be at the university.

"I'm looking forward to learning more and doing really good work on behalf of the university and on behalf of the commonwealth," she said.

Gabel, 55, is the [first female to take the reins at Pitt](#) and did so accepting a \$950,000-a-year base salary. Building up the pool of women who serve as campus executives and [now number around 30% at major research universities](#), is an important milestone that should be celebrated, she said.

"But at the end of the day ..., " she said, "I'm not getting a pass so I just have to get to it and get the work done."

She comes to Pitt after serving as University of Minnesota's president for the past four years climbing to that position after serving in faculty, dean and administrative roles at four other universities.

Gabel has been making the rounds to introduce herself to the campus, community and state. As part of that, she paused to speak with PennLive on Tuesday to share some thoughts about herself and issues the university is contending with when it comes to state funding.

**On setting tuition without state funding being known:** "The tuition question is always a difficult question because it's always our last mile in terms of addressing what have been very high cost increases," she said. "When the inflationary environment is where it is, keeping up with that, making sure that you are fiscally responsible while also minimizing the burden on students and their families is always a difficult decision. "

Pitt requested \$160.1 million. Gov. Josh Shapiro recommended \$162.3 million. At this point, though, no funding has been approved by the legislature in the ongoing state budget impasse.

"The most fulsome partnership with the state would be that the funding is at a sufficient level that it covers all increases in costs but such that you wouldn't have to look to increases in tuition to close that gap," she said.

**Avoiding returning to its status as a private university:** Pitt was a private university until 1966 when it began to receive state funding that is given in exchange for a lower tuition price for Pennsylvania students. Continuing to receive that state support to be considered a public university has become a struggle in recent years as lawmakers voice dismay over the school's tuition rate, its transparency and fetal tissue research.

Gabel is hopeful that by being good advocates about educating students as well as the research and discovery particularly in the area of health care innovation and treatment happening at Pitt, lawmakers who are pushing to cut off Pitt's state funding will come to see its value for the community, the commonwealth and beyond.

"At the end of the day, it's about mission and I'm very attracted to the fact that we do that mission in partnership with the state," she said.

**Openness to more transparency:** She is aware that some states have more robust open records laws and some less so but admits she is unfamiliar with what Pennsylvania's law requires.

"Our goal is for people to understand, for us to answer questions and clarify misunderstandings and create clarity around what we do, why we do it and how well we're doing," she said. "What we do as an institution isn't always clear to everyone and that's incumbent upon us to offer that clarity."

**Research involving tissue from aborted fetuses:** She understands the source of the concern that others have but "I also understand and deeply believe in the academic freedom around research and the importance of using appropriate standards." She said Pitt is 100% compliant with appropriate research protocols with "the outcomes of what we do lead to treatments and cures that save lives. So we're very committed to health sciences research to med-tech innovation and that is who we are and it creates enormous economic development, creates jobs and most importantly, it saves lives."

**Declining enrollment at regional campuses:** She said it's too soon for her to say what will happen with Pitt's four regional campuses, which have experienced a decade of decline with the Titusville campus down to 23 students. She said there's more work to do with enrollment management. She said the university needs to take a deep dive into the mission and impact of each of those campuses before it would consider closing any of them.

**Joining in the governor's higher ed funding redesign conversation:** She welcomes the opportunity to join with a team of leaders from Pennsylvania's colleges and universities to brainstorm about what would be considered a good outcome for the commonwealth when it comes to its higher education landscape.

"I'm really excited about that," she said.

**Her goals:** Beyond getting acquainted with the campus community and working through the budget stuff, refreshing the university's strategic plan and beginning to implement falls into her mid- and long-term goals. She is aware of some innovation Pitt has underway in the area of biotech and once she gets a deeper understanding of it, she plans to be its "number one cheerleader in whatever audience I find myself in."

**Mixing with students:** Since her son is a rising senior at Pitt, she has no doubt about finding time to engage with students on campus. In fact, she intends to build that into her schedule, knowing how uplifting it can be.

"If you're feeling anxious or sad about what's happening in the world, spend some time with college students anywhere but especially here," Gabel said. "They will make you feel better. Their expectations, their ambition, their questions, their hopes and dreams and how they're going about their lives are very inspiring."

**Being the chancellor to a son at Pitt:** Gabel said her son was "very supportive and encouraged me to do it and was very, very supportive as I was named and also hopes to lay low and hopes that no one makes the connection between him and me. He wants all of that at the same time," she said, with a laugh.

And she intends to help him do that apparently.

Asked her son's name, she replied: "Yeah, you're not going to get that."

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