

Testimony on SB 135

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide Interested Party testimony for Senate Bill 135.

I am a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the Ohio State University. Today, I am speaking as the chair of the Ohio Faculty Council, an organization that represents the faculty at the 14 state-supported universities in the great state of Ohio. Faculty represent the academic core of any institution of higher education. The Ohio Faculty Council supports the overarching goals of SB 135 - the goal of increasing the number of Ohioans who attain post-secondary certificates and degrees, the goal of all Ohioans having access to higher education, and the goal of making education affordable.

In-demand Jobs

We applaud the state's effort to promote preparation of Ohioans for in-demand jobs. Ohio's state universities have many job-specific degrees that lead to gainful employment the day after graduation. However, universities also provide experiences and opportunities that allow students to be successful employees in degree programs that do not have only one specific job as its culmination. All our degree programs are aimed at developing productive, well-rounded and thoughtful employees and citizens.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average number of jobs a person has in a lifetime is twelve. The ability to think broadly, flexibly, and creatively enables students to thrive in careers that span multiple jobs. These transferable skills are taught and learned in all our academic disciplines. Having excellent communication and collaborative skills leads to a successful career. Making decisions about degree programs or the State Share of Instruction (SSI) based on in-demand jobs could lead to undesirable consequences for students and employers and could put Ohio's universities at a disadvantage for attracting the best students and faculty.

Suspension/Limitation of Enrollment in Bachelor's Degree Programs

Ohio's universities are committed to providing relevant and useful degrees that support students in their careers. Senate Bill 135 contains some very general and concerning language about authorizing the chancellor to suspend or limit enrollment in degree programs with low completion rates. It is not clear how completion rate will be measured, but the bigger question is why these determinations would not be left to the institutions. Universities are highly motivated to provide the best educational opportunities to serve the needs of students and the state, and to do so in the most efficient and effective way possible. Universities regularly evaluate their programs, with both internal and external reviews, in the interest of improving and refining them. Using low completion rates as a sole measure for suspending degree programs could lead to misguided decisions. For example, a degree program in Forensics is highly specialized and likely to have low enrollment but will turn out graduates that are highly valuable to society. To give authority to the chancellor to suspend programs based on an undefined measure is not in the best interest of students, the universities, or the state.

4-year degrees at Community Colleges

Opening community colleges to offer non-applied bachelor's degrees creates the risk of significant duplication of degrees, and more troubling the potential for delivering advanced coursework with less qualified instructors. Instructors matter. The Higher Learning Commission, the body that accredits institutions of higher education in Ohio, looks very carefully at instructor qualifications as one of the many strict criteria for accreditation. The full-time and tenure-track faculty at the state universities are highly qualified and have a broad understanding of their fields of study. Upper-level course work in all disciplines require deep understanding of the subject matter for faculty to teach accurately and to prepare students for ever-changing world.

Community colleges and technical centers are poised to provide the best resources for many applied degrees and to prepare students for further education in a variety of disciplines, but to allow for the creation of duplicative baccalaureate programs, would require community colleges to hire qualified instructors and would diminish resources across the state higher education system. It also fails to uphold the outstanding programs that technical schools, community colleges, and state and regional universities currently provide to offer a range of opportunities to Ohio citizens, as well as opportunities for Ohio's employers to partner with institutions to develop applied and specialized degree and certificate programs.

Administrative Costs and Reporting Requirements

Faculty are in favor of the chancellor reporting how revenue is used with respect to teaching costs and administrative costs. We are concerned with the significant growth of spending on administrative processes and initiatives that affect faculty employment and productivity, taking away from the university's core mission of teaching, research and outreach.

Unfortunately, the additional reporting requirements that are included in this bill will further increase administrative costs. For example, all universities survey recent graduates to assess their initial employment. However, for the state to mandate accurate and up-to-date employment information from all alumni will increase the administrative burden on our universities and require additional staffing. The Ohio Faculty Council urges the committee to consider the added benefit of requiring additional data collection and reporting relative to the added cost. Please be mindful that the added costs will increase the cost of education to the student and further erode the budget for the core academic mission.

Second Chance Grant Pilot Program

The Ohio Faculty Council agrees with the idea of supporting individuals who have started but not completed a degree. That will help with the state's attainment goal. However, individuals who do not complete come from all certificate and degree institutions, not just the state universities. In fact, students are just as likely, or more so, to have started at a community college or technical center, and thus targeting students from the state universities for the 2nd chance grants limits its impact. In fact, it may be easier and less expensive to complete a certificate or a 2-yr degree, and so the \$2000 grant would have a larger impact on those students, be more likely to lead to completion, and thus accelerate Ohio's progress toward our attainment goal.

Campus Free Speech

One of the most important ways for faculty to engage student learning is to relate what is being discussed in the classroom with what is happening in the real world. Students benefit from connecting course material to their lives. The idea of discussing only material for which the faculty member has scholarly expertise risks depersonalizing the instructor, and missing important cross-disciplinary connections and real-world applications of the course material.

Universities lead society in encouraging free thought and speech. **That is what we do.** There is little evidence that there is any suppression of speech happening in classrooms. It is quite the opposite. The bill contains phrases like “closing off the discussion of ideas” and “substantially interfere with the freedom of others to express views”. There is a complete disconnect of the notions contained in these phrases from what happens within our universities and our classrooms. Faculty and students at our state universities have hundreds of thousands of interactions each semester, and yet few if any instances of what this bill points to are ever reported.

The US and Ohio Constitution set out the parameters of free speech; These founding principles which protect students and faculty alike are also embedded in our university’s codes of conducts and disciplinary and grievance procedures. In grade disputes, students have many informal and formal process to address their concerns. To impose additional board oversight and reporting is duplicative, costly, and unnecessary. I or any one of our OFC members would be happy to have you sit in on our courses and observe how we welcome and encourage a variety of perspectives and ideas. You will be amazed at how open the discussion is, and how informed, diverse, tolerant, and thoughtful our students are.

Summary

In summary, we agree with the overarching goals laid out in SB 135 and contend that universities are currently working hard every day to reach those goals of access, affordability, efficiency, attainment, and open discussion. We have had many successes in these areas over the past five years. The major concern of faculty is that provisions in this bill will produce **unintended consequences**. We ask you to consider the cumulative effect of additional legislative requirements on the efficiency of the university. If enacted, many of these new measures will inevitably produce shifts in effort and priorities away from our core mission of education.

Let me close by saying that Ohio Faculty Council is always willing to partner with this committee if you ever want a faculty perspective on any legislation.

Chairman Johnson, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions you may have.