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Thank you, Chairman Carfagna, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Rebecca Watts, and I serve as Chancellor of Western Governors University (WGU) Ohio. My colleagues and I are honored to be a part of Ohio's work to successfully compete for business investment and jobs, by increasing the number of its citizens holding trusted postsecondary education credentials and relevant skills for employment in the 21st century workplace.

We are grateful for the support of Ohio legislators, the Governor, the Chancellor of Higher Education and the greater Ohio business community for welcoming WGU's newest state affiliate last year. Our programs complement the higher-education opportunities offered through Ohio's excellent public and private colleges and universities by providing an additional option for motivated students who want to advance in their careers. Through expanded opportunities for affordable, accredited, high quality postsecondary education, more Ohioans will attain postsecondary credentials of value that enhance their career pathways and strengthen their abilities to support themselves and their families. Earning these credentials demonstrates that graduates have gained the knowledge and skills for in-demand careers that feed the future economic prosperity of our state.

As a not-for-profit, accredited, online, competency-based university, WGU Ohio's programs help address the state's workforce needs in nursing, business, K-12 education, and information technology. Since our launch in June 2018, WGU Ohio's enrollment has grown to 3,141 students. WGU has produced more than 3,374 graduates in the state since the university's founding in 1997. Because WGU students can begin at the first of any month and graduate as soon as they have completed their program requirements, our enrollment and graduate numbers grow monthly. For WGU Ohio, 77 percent of our students work full-time and 71

percent come from underserved populations. Nearly half of our Ohio students are first-generation college students.

The average time for a WGU student to earn a bachelor's degree is less than three years, at an average cost to the student of approximately \$16,000. This investment produces great returns quickly after graduation with an average increase in annual salary of \$12,500 within two years of graduation. WGU operates as a private, nonprofit university that is self-sustaining on per-student tuition of just over \$7,000 per year. For Ohio communities, this degree of affordability makes it possible for teachers, nurses, and other professionals to advance their knowledge and skills without taking on debt that would force them to leave their communities to seek higher salaries in larger markets.

Through our Responsible Borrowing Initiative (RBI), all WGU students who apply for financial aid receive a personalized Financial Aid Plan, which recommends that students borrow only their “unmet direct costs”—tuition and fees minus any grants or scholarships. RBI is producing the desired results. Since 2013, the average borrowing per year per WGU student (of those who borrow) has decreased by more than 40 percent, to an average of \$3,250 per year. Between July 2013 and June 2016, the average amount borrowed per WGU student decreased by 41 percent - a total savings of \$400 million.

WGU Ohio supports the dedication to financial assistance, affordability and workforce development included in the DeWine administration’s proposed budget. Our students participate in multiple financial assistance programs which would receive increased funding under the proposed biennial budget, including the Ohio College Opportunity Grant, the War Orphan Scholarship, and the Nursing Loan Program. As I indicated in testimony before the Joint Committee on Ohio College Affordability last July, affordability is central to our mission, and the availability of these programs to WGU Ohio students helps advance that mission. Further, with one of the largest colleges of nursing in the U.S. and our model of competency-based education targeted toward adult learners, we support and hope to meaningfully participate in the Chancellor’s Health Care Workforce Preparation Task Force to study, evaluate, and make

recommendations regarding health care workforce needs in Ohio.

Further, we fully support the proposed funding Increase for Choose Ohio First In the biennial budget, to focus on under-represented students. Through our partnership with the Ohio Association of Community Colleges, community college graduates seamlessly transfer coursework to WGU to continue their education and achieve a bachelor's degree. To assure continuity of support for community college graduates who were enrolled in Choose Ohio First programs at their community colleges, WGU Ohio looks forward to the opportunity next year to submit a proposal to the Ohio Department of Higher Education to become a Choose Ohio First Institution through specified programs leading to STEM careers.

The 19 governors who founded WGU in 1997 saw the transformative power of competency-based education (CBE) as an academic model that reimagines higher education by measuring actual learning – competency – rather than time spent in a seat. The model is particularly well-suited to adult students who have some college experience but no degree. This is key in Ohio, as according to the Lumina Foundation's *A Stronger Nation* 2018 report, Ohio has over 975,000 residents with some college experience, but no degree.¹ It is clear that there remains much work to be done.

WGU Ohio is committed to quality, affordability, and results. Our work is supported through our employer and community college partnerships as well as the expertise of an advisory board of Ohio leaders in business, K-12 education, information technology, and community colleges. These advisors assure that we understand the education-to-workforce needs throughout the regions and economic sectors in our state. We are grateful for their leadership and expertise.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and for all that you do to support Ohio's students. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

¹ Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation*, available at <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2018/-state/OH>, last accessed July 13, 2018