

Senate Finance Committee Testimony, May 22nd, 2019

Topic: Higher Education

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Good morning Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and all of the senators on the finance and higher education committees. My name is Madison Taylor, and I come to you from the Ohio Student Association, a statewide organization that builds power for students on campuses across the state so they can get the reforms they need. Last year our network registered 140,000 people to vote, including 30,000 students, knocked on 100,000 doors, distributed 150,000 voter guides, and collected 740,000 signatures for the ballot initiative known as Issue 1. In our conversations with students across the state, it's crystal clear that we're up against a lot -- from skyrocketing debt and hunger to mental health crises and housing insecurity. We decided to do something about that, and have pulled together a coalition of top unions, policy shops, access programs, and student groups, collectively representing 140,000 members. You may have met some of our student volunteers in our lobby visits over the past month. We've sat with ten of your colleagues across the house and senate to share our priorities, and time and time again we've heard concern for student mental health, a topic I want to discuss with you today.

We're encouraged that our elected officials care about our mental health and want to do something about it, but we're concerned that the approaches on the table address the symptoms, but do not get at the root issues. I want to talk about those roots issues.

Not having the financial security to access higher education is a dynamic barrier. It grows and builds, then topples over like dominos to perpetuate the same issues that we started

with. For some, it is about survival. More accurately, it is about having to constantly choose survival at the expense of experiences that will prepare them for their careers. Amongst other things, these barriers exist because financial aid does not always cover costs outside of tuition-- food, housing, transportation, healthcare-- that are necessary to successfully complete an education.

Therefore, again, students are forced to choose survival-- working 1, 2, sometimes 3 or more jobs to live, to eat, and to take care of themselves. Working takes time. It takes time away from a student's ability to study and prioritize their education. It takes time away from career-advancing opportunities. It takes time away from being able to cook a healthy meal for yourself. I have friends whose only option given their time restraints from work, classes, homework, and sometimes taking care of their families, is to eat out at cheap, unhealthy fast food restaurants to get sustenance and survive for that paycheck. But that method isn't sustainable, financially or physically. The end of a paycheck means crackers and grilled cheese. It means cans of beans that have been in the cabinet for who-knows-how-long. It means dipping into savings-- spending money you don't have. It means never having the means to plan for your future, and what options does that leave us? It bring us right back to where we started--having to choose survival over any type of happiness, whether that be in our careers, or in our personal lives.

We ask ourselves why we have a mental health crisis in Ohio. We bandage the proximate effects. But what we don't do is pull from the root. Having to consistently manage the stress of multiple jobs, bills and expenses, and a full class schedule is the cornerstone of our crisis. Students cannot focus on success and sustenance simultaneously. As long as student

financial insecurity exists across all of higher education, we will continue to see a decline in Ohioans' mental health.

We desperately need to expand funding for mental health services, and this congress is making strides toward that. But we must also get at the causes of student stress, and the solutions are right in front of us:

First, we can make Ohio's financial aid system more fair by changing the way we define "Cost of Attendance" and opening up financial aid to community college students. The federal government defines "Cost of Attendance" as tuition, housing, board, fees, and transportation. Ohio, however, looks just at tuition. As a result, community college students are locked out from the Ohio College Opportunity Grant because they cannot use that funding for the expenses that impact them most directly, and must use up their Pell Grant before they can receive Ohio financial aid. We can make this crucial aid available to all Ohio students by allowing them to use it for room and board, and also by raising the eligibility cap so more middle class students can receive this resource.

Second, we can expand targeted emergency aid grants like the Ohio CARES program that have been proven to successfully lower college drop out rates. I have had peers stay on my couch when their housing options fell through and have seen people risk leaving college because of a car breaking down. Targeted grants like this can mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out, and can help provide the peace of mind to *actually* address student mental health.

Third, we must address rampant hunger and food insecurity on campuses. 36 percent of COLLEGE students in Ohio face food insecurity, and currently our campuses' main strategy to address that is by opening food pantries. We must expand funding for programs that *actually* address student hunger.

We can start by getting the state's support for financial aid back to 2008 levels. The financial aid crisis led us to cut student aid in half, and we are only now starting to inch back toward our previous investment. The increase to State's Share of Instruction in this budget is a good start, but we can move quicker by connecting SSI to an annual Cost-Of-Living Increase. At the end of the day, these reforms require an investment in our future.

All of these reforms cost money, but the money is right in front of us. Your colleagues in the House included an amendment in this budget to shrink the LLC Tax Loophole. Though this tax incentive helps small businesses, we also know that it is being abused by individuals like lawyers and lobbyists who do not create jobs. We can save *at least* \$200 million by simply shrinking the eligibility cap for the tax incentive from \$250,000 to \$100,000. The state has a choice -- will we invest in lawyers and lobbyists; or will we invest in the students who will build Ohio's future. We call on this Senate to protect the positive changes proposed by the House and close the LLC loophole.

Student financial security and positive mental health are inextricably linked. We have the opportunity to change what it means for students to experience college, and therefore, experience the rest of their lives. If we start from the root, imagine what we could grow-- an Ohio where students are thriving in their classes, eating healthy meals, and feeling both secure and hopeful about our future.