

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, MAY 22, 2019

SUBMITTED BY WESTERN GOVERNORS UNIVERSITY

Chancellor Rebecca Watts, Ph.D.

with Students and Alumni

Good morning, Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Committee. Thank you 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 Ohioans holding trusted postsecondary credentials and relevant skills for the 21st century workplace.

Unfortunately, language in the substitute version of HB 166 would prohibit the Ohio Chancellor of Higher Education from renewing WGU's certificate of authorization, rendering Ohioans enrolled at WGU ineligible for the Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG), the Ohio War Orphans Scholarship, the Ohio National Guard and Reserve Scholarship, and Nurse Education Assistance Loan Program (NEALP).

Joining me today are WGU alumni and students. You will first hear from Dr. Laura Rush, from the OhioHealth Research and Innovation Institute. Laura will be followed by Ryan Daniels, Christine Johnson, Jill Wood, Stephanie Nolen, Madalyn Keen, Melinda Helton, and Matt Mercer.

Laura Rush Testimony

Good morning, Chair Dolan and members of the Committee. I am Laura Rush, and I'm here today to attest to the fact that WGU provides life-changing opportunities for students of all ages and backgrounds and does so with a unique competency-based model that allows students to thrive and succeed. As a graduate of WGU's Business College I know firsthand that WGU offers the most accessible and affordable online education for adult learners. Furthermore, WGU graduates fill vital roles in the workforce of Ohio.

While I was fortunate that I did not need state aid while completing my business degree at WGU, that was not the case years ago when I enrolled in a community college as an unskilled, divorced waitress trying to make a better life for myself. Every single dollar that I received in scholarships and student aid allowed me to stay in school and continue to fight for a better future for myself. That financial support helped me launch a successful career in healthcare and I am now a proud, productive tax-paying citizen of the State of Ohio. Please do not take this opportunity away from others. WGU gives people a real chance to make a difference for themselves, their families, and their communities. I implore you to remove the revisions from House Bill 166 that would be so detrimental to WGU students.

Christine Johnson Testimony

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I am Christine Johnson. My family and I live in Cincinnati. I am a working mother and I am enrolled in WGU's Marketing Program. I am completing this program because it's my goal to own my own home care agency and to serve as a marketing consultant to other agencies.

As a mother of five children, age 8, 9, 10, 16, and 20, it is impossible for me to physically attend classes. I care for my children full-time. As a learner, I do not do well in a lecture format, which has made the WGU model has been very effective for me. The one-on-one support I get from my faculty mentor and course instructors is working well for me.

The Ohio College Opportunity Grant has made it possible for me to go to college to pursue my career goals for myself and for my family. I am grateful for the support and want you to know that I am working very hard, spending sleepless nights studying to complete my program and pursue my plans to start a home care agency to serve people in my community.

Jill Wood Testimony

Good morning, Chairman Dolan and members of the Committee. I am Jill Wood and I live in Pataskala, Ohio, in Licking County. I chose WGU to complete my degree because I am a mom of three kids and currently have some health issues that will be resolved soon.

Because of my family responsibilities, I needed the ability to do school from home. I chose WGU because it offers online learning and because of the flat-rate tuition that lets me complete as many courses in a term as I can for no additional cost. The state-funded financial aid I receive helps me cover the remaining tuition that my federal aid doesn't cover.

I had been in college before, so it was important for me to limit my student debt as much as possible. WGU is the only online school I could find where I could complete a degree in education and get licensed through the state.

I am currently enrolled in WGU's bachelor's degree in Elementary Education program. My goal is to ultimately become a reading specialist. I know how much Ohio is working to support literacy skills in our young learners. It's important to me to be able to support struggling readers so they can build long-term success.

Stephanie Nolen Testimony

Good morning, Chairperson Dolan and Members of the Committee. My name is Stephanie Nolen, and I live in Obetz, Ohio. I am getting ready to begin my final semester in my degree plan to obtain my Bachelor of Arts, Interdisciplinary Studies (K-8). I choose WGU to complete my degree for a couple different reasons, the first being the affordability. We are a one-paycheck family of 8, as my husband works full-time while I stay home with our children. This brings me to my second reason for choosing WGU, flexibility. Being a full-time, stay-at-home parent of six children who are 2 to 21, means that my schedule is busy. I needed a program that I could do on my own time and at my own pace. Thirdly, I was able to transfer 19 competency units from my previous Associate degree.

This fall I will do my 12 weeks of student teaching at the same Ohio school that hosted me for my observation teaching because they were so impressed by how prepared and determined I was. These are skills that WGU taught and expanded on throughout my degree plan. I will graduate in November and then I will begin looking for a full-time teaching position in an Ohio elementary school.

I have received the Ohio College Opportunity Grant throughout my academic career. This grant, and ones like it, offer Ohio students the financial stability that they may not be able to get otherwise. Ohio students, regardless of where they attend schools, should have a state that stands behind them and offers them the best possibility at success. Although I am a WGU student, I will be teaching in the State of

Ohio. This means that while I am not contributing to my local colleges I will be contributing to my community and the child who reside in our great state.

Madalyn Keel Testimony

Good morning, Chair Dolan and Members of the Committee. My name is Madalyn Keel and I have lived in Columbus Ohio my whole life. I graduated from Grove City High School and I have stayed close ever since. After having bounced around and completed some courses in community college, I unfortunately couldn't afford much more.

I got married, had a baby, and then when settled, I wanted to go back to school. I found that WGU had great ratings and an affordable price and could put me right through to my teaching license, it was a win-win-win. I now can stay home with my daughter instead of going to a classroom after work. And I am using what I already know to accelerate my studies.

I am enrolled in WGU's Teachers College, studying to become a high school biology teacher. My goal is to give back and work in Columbus City Schools. I want to be the teacher our children need, provide care and attention and hopefully create a great bunch of young adults to go out into Ohio's workforce. This has made me passionate about teaching, what really made me want to become a teacher.

I honestly wouldn't have gone back to school if not for WGU. The state grant I got relieved financial stress. It was a blessing during a hard time when I didn't think I could continue.

Melinda Helton Testimony

Good morning, Chairman Dolan and Members of the Committee. I am Melinda Helton, and I live in Troy Ohio. I am enrolled in the Bachelor of Science Program in Health Information Management at WGU. I am a single mother of three who just gained custody of my four nephews. The WGU program has been a blessing to my life. I have always told people that you must have the work/life balance, well this same principle applies to my schooling at WGU.

I work at Sinclair Community College as an internship administrative assistant part time. I love what I do, and I love how WGU has helped me become a better person for my work and children. I juggle work, school, household, and kids' activities, and WGU has made it possible for me to obtain a Bachelor's degree that I never thought I could.

The cost of other colleges in our area exceeded my financial means, but, when my manager told me about WGU I was thrilled to know that I could continue my education to reach my goal and show my kids that anything is possible. They are so proud of their mother for accomplishing these tasks.

They have seen walk in my graduation with Sinclair Community College and WGU. To see their faces as I gained another step closer to my goal makes me proud to know they have my back. I do plan on continuing my education at WGU in August 2019 in their MBA program so I may be able to teach at Sinclair College. While working at Sinclair, I encourage other students just like me to pursue WGU. They are ecstatic to know they won't have to go into debt gaining a Bachelor's/Master's all the while being able

to juggle work and life expectations. As students, we should not have to worry about going into debt from student loans. Please do not take away these opportunities away from Ohioans.

Matt Mercer Testimony

Good morning, Chairman Dolan and Members of the Committee. My name is Matt Mercer and I live in upper Sandusky Ohio. I'm the director of emergency services at Wyandot Memorial Hospital, where I lead an amazing team of healthcare professionals. In addition to being a registered nurse, I am also an Enrolled Agent, sole proprietor of a small tax firm, and formerly a senior tax advice specialist at Intuit. I'm blessed to be the father of five wonderful children ages 11 and under, two of which have special needs.

I chose WGU so I can continue to progress as a leader in my organization, as well as make meaningful impacts in the healthcare industry in Ohio. My major is accounting, which I chose because it is the language of business and no one can truly improve any business or industry without a deep understanding how business activities and financials interrelate. I will finish my Bachelor of Science accounting this month and plan on moving on to the MBA program later this year.

WGU's go-at-your own pace aspect allows me to devote less time to topics I'm already highly experienced with, such as tax accounting and focus more time on topics I was not so familiar with, such as auditing or managerial accounting.

The demand for well-educated business professionals in healthcare and other industries in Ohio is undeniable. But this education is not without its costs. Costs like tuition and technology fees, but other costs like time away from family, late nights studying, early mornings finishing papers, the stress of trying to keep up with education and work and family and more. State funded grants can help offset the financial cost and make it easier for non-traditional students like me to advance ourselves to better impact Ohio.

Removing state funded grants and scholarships for hard-working Ohioans such as myself who have chosen a university that makes sense in the modern world places an additional obstacle in our path to contributing to a better Ohio. I urge you to oppose depriving Ohio students of this benefit.

Rebecca Watts Closing

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, on behalf of our students and alumni, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. We welcome any questions you have for us.