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**EASTERN
GATEWAY
COMMUNITY
COLLEGE**

Wednesday, May 20, 2015: 1:00 p.m.
Senate Higher Education Subcommittee

Chairman Gardner, Vice Chair Cafaro, and members of the Senate Higher Education Subcommittee, my name is Dr. Laura Meeks, and I am the President of Eastern Gateway Community College, which serves the students, communities, and businesses in Jefferson, Columbiana, Mahoning, and Warren counties.

I am here today to tell you something that you already know: businesses throughout our state are desperate for community colleges to graduate as many students as we can to fill a skills gap that exists in Ohio.

While I'm sure many of the tax credits and grant programs that the state offers play an important role in helping businesses decide to locate in or grow their presence in Ohio, unless a company can be convinced that there is an available and qualified workforce in this state, they will simply look elsewhere.

Through countless studies done at the national level, we know that to make Ohio attractive to those companies, we need to have 60% of our state's adult population holding *at least* an associate degree. Currently, only 35% of our adults meet this measure. If we as a state want to change that number, we have to start changing the way we do business.

I want to tell you one more thing that I *hope* you know: we will not close the gap between 35% and 60% by placing our focus solely on the traditional college student who comes right out of high school and goes on to one our very excellent universities in this state. Instead, we will close that gap by focusing on increasing the percentage of working adults, African Americans, part-time students and Hispanic Ohioans who earn a college degree. That's what all of the studies say. For whatever reason, all of these populations have traditionally chosen community colleges as the place they feel most comfortable learning.

Yet as important as their success is to the state overall, we have often made funding decisions and policy choices that make it harder for them to graduate, get a good-paying job, and completely change the trajectory of their life. I would ask your consideration of the following changes to this budget that will help more of these people work their way through college:

- Once again allow community college students full access to the OCOG program. Please reverse the PELL-first decision that cut off 29,000 community college students from accessing this important program. Simply put, it's harder for a working adult with a full time job and a family to complete college than it is for the traditional age college student to complete. The current OCOG program is primarily designed with that graduating high school senior in mind. If Ohio wants more middle class working adults to complete college, and increase their earning potential, then it has to change the OCOG program so that it benefits ALL college students.
- Ohio needs to simplify its transfer and articulation process so that students know that they can take any associate degree earned at a community college or regional university campus and seamlessly transfer it to any university in Ohio. While it's important that the degree transfer, it's even more important that the student enter with junior status, and that their entire degree can be guaranteed to apply towards a bachelor degree just as if they had started at that university as a freshman. States

who guarantee this transfer of associate degrees, like Florida, not only see lower overall student debt levels, but also see higher numbers of students complete their degrees overall.

- Increase the level of resources available to community colleges to implement programs on campus to help more students complete their certificate or degree program. This increase could come from additional tuition dollars or from additional state basic aid through the SSI formula, or a combination of both. As the Senate considers the overall affordability of a college education, we hope you will remember that community colleges have been accepting the challenge of providing an affordable college education for decades. We hope that the senate budget can reflect an appreciation of that long-standing commitment.

Finally, as we talk about affordability and reducing the levels of student debt in this state, I must mention college credit plus, because it will be a game-changer for this state. As more and more students take advantage of college credit plus, we will see our state's average student debt level continue to shrink. Through this program, we are increasingly seeing Ohio's best and brightest students start their college careers at community college. One change you can make to accelerate that learning for these students is to ensure that students can take college credit plus courses during the summer months. While high schools are closed in the summer months, our community colleges are open, and we would welcome those who want to learn with open arms. In fact with this change, I believe Ohio will see a substantial increase in the amount of students earning entirely free college degrees, by graduating both high school and college at the same time.

I would like to finish by not only thanking you for your time today, but thanking you for all that you do. Perhaps better than most, college presidents understand the competing demands that pull you as public officials, and the difficult decisions that you have make, all in the interest of doing the right thing for Ohio. Thank you for your service and for your consideration of the ideas presented today.

I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.