

Ohio Student Association Testimony

Liz Marasco

Honorable Chairman Gardner and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. My name is Liz Marasco and I am a graduate of Ohio State University. I graduated summa cum laude with a 3.95 GPA, fluency in another language, and approximately \$31,000 in student loan debt.

Whether or not I would go to college was never a question. I was never presented with alternatives to higher education. My parents, in their boundless love and good intentions, helped me get to that point but were unable to help me pay for it. When I was invited to join the diving team at Penn State University, without a scholarship, I had to say yes. Saying no to college and collegiate athletics at a prestigious Big Ten school was an absurd notion. I blindly took out loans, placing pieces of the financial puzzle together to realize my own and my parents' dreams. In the hazy pre-collegiate bliss, principals and interest percentages were minute details, formalities that needed to be exchanged before I could just go to college already.

I continued to add to my education tab as I moved through college. My French professors told me I *had* to study abroad, it was the only way to really learn a language, of course I did. The numbers started to accumulate but, even at 19, 20, 21 years old, I could not begin to understand the meaning of the debt under which I was placing myself. I would occasionally take a moment to let the numbers sink in, to force myself to understand the burdensome responsibility I was assuming, but I would quickly be overcome with panic. I would pacify myself by repeating the mantra I had been told all through high school, by my parents, teachers, guidance counselors, "I am making an investment in myself."

The jobs I want are not available to me with a Bachelor's. A Master's is simply out of the question for me. Now that I've begun to make payments on my student loans, now that I am understanding the weight, the oppressive gravity of these payments, I could never add to that. And yet, in my desperation, I occasionally will convince myself that it's not so bad. Desperation is often the source of illogical decisions.

So now we have created a country where young folks, smart, innovative, creative, inspirational people, the *future* of America, are completely mired in monthly payments. These young people are sometimes shackled to jobs they dislike so they can pay their bills, they are bound to landlords and rental properties, living with a constant state of hopelessness that they are fighting a battle they may never win. Speaking for myself, I feel as though I am in fetters. Any move, professional or personal, I make at this point is one hundred percent contingent on being able to make monthly payments on my loans. Frankly, it terrifies me. It terrifies me that something other than myself could have such control over my life. I'm terrified of

taking risks because of these payments. Buying a home? Having a child? Even owning a car. These are ideas exist far outside my reach.

So I ask you now: is this the country you want to live in? A place where the citizens are haunted by an intangible presence that guides their decisions? A country where ambitious and intelligent young people are afraid of taking risks? A country where people have surrendered any aspiration of one day signing a mortgage on a new home or working part-time while they write a novel?

Just think of how many opportunities for greatness we have missed because of this.

Alli Rigel

Honorable Chairman Gardner and members of the committee,

When I first entered college, I was wearing the rose-colored glasses of the American Dream. Having grown up in varied degrees of poverty, supported by a single mother that carried the economic stigma of bankruptcy and ongoing student loans herself, I started working towards my med school ambition very early. I held a job consistently from the moment I turned 16, graduated Valedictorian, collected a handful of scholarships, and gained acceptance at a top university. Although I started at Miami, my mother got a job at Ohio State and so I transferred to get reduced tuition, an opportunity I could not afford to miss since my parent's offered no assistance otherwise. I flourished at Ohio State, making the Dean's List every semester in honors juggling a biochemistry and sexuality studies degree, 20+ hours a week at my job, multiple internships, research and volunteering, among a longer list of activities. I would go several months in a row without having a Friday or Saturday off. I pinched pennies in every way I could manage. Many of my top-performing peers lacked debt, did not have to keep a job, and de-stressed with leisure spending every weekend. But I was convinced that hard work ethic was all they asked in the promise of the American Dream and I was determined to earn it.

The first major set of hits came my junior year. My mother quit her job without notice, especially trialling after giving up my scholarship at Miami to transfer. In the transition from quarters to semesters, my advisor had failed to get me into the correct courses and I was told I would have to take a 5th year even though I had loaded myself with credits and had only 8-10 classes left. Entering this final year without any scholarships left or the reduced tuition, I was still doing really well. But late in summer, the joys of campus housing and slumlords resulted in the destruction of my home and belongings, costing me most of my savings and leaving me homeless for 2 full months. I was unable to afford my retake on the MCAT before the application cycle. The student loans I had been receiving were capped and several thousand dollars were denied last minute. Then, the company where I'd maintained a job for 3 years shut down with only a few weeks notice, and, despite my immediate re-employment, the company where I got a second job shut down

with 2 days notice just a month later. When my laptop broke, i was almost offended by this series of bad luck. I used the last of my savings on medical school apps but came up short, unable to afford the majority of them. I used 100% of my Christmas money, the last of my loans, and money from odd jobs and turned them in just 2 days short of the due date. For those of you who know what rolling admissions are, this delay will prove a vital disadvantage as I wait for my acceptance letters. I finally have a job again but, in the coming months, I will need expensive business clothes, plane tickets and gas money for interviews across the United States, and thousands to place down a deposit.

I worked hard, chose a major with highly eligible job opportunities, and proved myself capable for 4 years of college and yet in the final year, the extreme stress of this loan cut and unpredictably bad financial conditions, has left my application status compromised and my comfort nonexistent. As I file my exit interviews, the weight of my accumulated debt weighs on me and leaves me fearful of a future I worked way too hard for to fear. I'm very upset by the proposed state budget. While you give billions in tax cuts to the rich, you deny people like me the right to become hardworking contributing citizens. By failing to give funds to higher education and financial aid, you commit to the lie of the American dream. You use your position as my representative to line the pockets of rich at the price of your honest, hardworking constituents that put you there.

Please make a different choice. Redirect the tax breaks for the rich, and invest in higher education. Invest in me, and others like me who want better for themselves and for their communities.

Grace Goodluck

Honorable Chairman Gardner and members of the committee,

My name is Grace Goodluck and I just completed my sophomore year at Kent State University. College was always presented to me as an inevitable part of my future - I was told from childhood that I would attend college, in order to get a job and have a successful future. The part that I did not realize until it was time to actually take this step is how hard this process actually is - getting into the university you wanted did not necessarily mean it was the one you could afford to go to.

I am a graduate from Cleveland Heights High School, and my first semester of college, I attended Cleveland State University, and commuted from my parents house. I had made this decision because it seemed the most financially sound, as I did not have to take out any loans. However, I was incredibly unhappy attending Cleveland State, and staying in my hometown. I felt like I was not moving forward with my life - I was living in the same house I had lived in my whole life, working my same part time job, and hanging out with the same friends from my hometown. I was paying less money, and not throwing myself into debt, but I did not feel like I was working towards anything.

I knew that I had to make a change. I transferred to Kent State and declared a Political Science major. I chose Kent partly because of the long history of activism, as I already knew then that I was interested in activism myself. I remember from applying to colleges in high school that Kent was considered one of the more affordable schools in Ohio. I did not take out any loans until I got to Kent State, and by the end of that spring semester, I was already \$6,000 in debt. That semester, taking three Political Science classes, I knew I had found my passion. It was the first time in my entire school career where I actually felt invested in my classes, and doing well in school.

It was not until my sophomore year, though, that I truly found my calling. I joined Kent's College Democrats at the beginning of the year, and through that, I registered voters, worked on a state representative campaign, and canvassed for the group Moms Demand Action. This began me on my quest to take action on the issues that I am truly passionate about it. Through being in student orgs, I found out about campus groups United Students Against Sweatshops and Ohio Student Association. They are both groups that are dedicated to alleviating the suffering of disenfranchised groups. Ohio Student Association has a campaign dedicated to ending student debt, and that is what brings me here today.

My sophomore year at Kent, and discovering activism, was truly enlightening and helped develop who I am as a person. However, I almost was not able to attend school this year. When I received my tuition bill the summer before, along with the total amount of financial aid I was getting, and found out that it would not be enough to cover my costs for school. I am from a low income family of five, and my Estimated Family Contribution for FAFSA has always been \$0. Previously, if I had extra costs that were not covered by aid, we were able to get money together through my part time job, and my parents finding some kind of miracle. This time, though, my father, the sole supporter of our family, had just lost his job, and any extra money was going towards paying bills, and keeping my family afloat. I could not even take the risk of getting a private loan - at my age it is necessary to have your parents co sign, and unfortunately for me, the credit scores of my parents did not take into account the tremendous financial difficulty of being a large, low income family, and because of this, I was rejected for a loan.

Rachael Collyer

Honorable Chairman Gardner and members of the committee,

My name is Rachael Collyer and I address you today I both as a student with a personal stake in the issue and also as an educational justice organizer with the Ohio Student Association. The Ohio Student Association builds grassroots political power to elevate the voices of Ohio's youth. We are currently active at 6 universities and in two cities, and we organize and advocate on issues that affect young people, and we engage thousands of young people in the political process. In 2014 we engaged 25,000 young voters in face-to-face conversations. We are the most powerful

organization of young people in Ohio. And the student debt crisis is without a doubt one of the most pervasive, urgent, and dire issues facing Ohio's young people today.

It is certainly an issue that has affected me and one that I am saddened to see grow worse and worse in our state. I am a proud lifelong resident of Ohio - I was born here, attended public school in Cleveland Heights, and chose to remain in Ohio to pursue higher education. In fact, I graduated summa cum laude from the Ohio State University last weekend. Normally this would be a time for celebration, but like countless students across Ohio, I graduated with the heavy burden of student debt. In many ways, I feel as though I have been lied to. It was always understood that I would go to college - both of my parents and their siblings went, and the conventional idea that hard work and a college education will bring you success actually applied to them. However, for most students today, this simplistic view of what is necessary to achieve the American Dream is a cruel illusion. It is incredibly frustrating that despite doing everything I was always told I needed to do to be successful, I now find myself in overwhelming debt. The saddest thing about this is that I am one of the lucky ones. My parents are middle class and have been able to help me out with expenses like textbooks, rent, and groceries, but there are so many students who do not have the same advantages, including my best friend. After we graduated from high school, he started taking classes at our local community college. His single mother could not afford to help him financially, so he was working full-time to pay his tuition on top of rent, bills, groceries, and transportation. He could not afford a car, so he took the bus to school, an hour long commute both ways. The financial, logistical, and academic stress were extremely hard on him, and he was ultimately unable to go back after his first semester. Conventional wisdom about the American meritocracy, that mythical level playing field, would dictate that my best friend simply did not work hard enough to pull himself up by his bootstraps. The truth is that the playing field is anything but level, and if anything, it has only become more uneven since our parents' generation. Since my parents attended college, the quality of a college education has dropped while the cost of higher education has steadily increased. There were also vastly more jobs that did not require a college education, while projections say that by 2020 55% of Ohio jobs will require higher education. Today only 25% of Ohioans have the necessary education. So since my parents were in college, higher education has become both more and more necessary and more and more expensive, and on top of that, minimum wage has stagnated and the current rates of youth unemployment and underemployment are far above the average for the entire population. The takeaway from all of this is that we are systematically denying young people a future, but it isn't just young people who will suffer. Ultimately our whole society will pay - my generation will be trapped paying for our education, our children's education, and our parents' medical bills - or at least trying to. And that's assuming that the debt bubble doesn't burst before then and destroy the economy.

The truly shameful thing is that things do not have to be this way. The challenges facing my generation are the consequences of political choices. Widening inequality, skyrocketing tuition, exploding student debt, decreasing quality of education, youth

unemployment and underemployment and mass incarceration - these are not simply the result of some economic perfect storm. They are the result of decades of bad policy decisions that do not reflect our values, and they can be corrected by decades of good policy decisions that do.

These bad policy decision are not the fault of the members of the house finance subcommittee on higher education, but it is your responsibility to help us find solutions to get Ohio back on the right track.

Actions speak louder than words, and the state budget is our values in action. It is our priorities as a state - and creating it, debating it, amending it, and passing it is one of the most important things you all will do while in office. That is why I am here speaking to you today, because I want a budget that reflects the values of my state.

As it stands, Ohio has already cut more funding for need-based financial aid than any other state in the midwest. This is an embarrassment, and the very least we can do with this budget is reinstate the Ohio College Opportunity grant to what it was before the recession. When I say this is the very least we can do, I am referring to the more than 4.5 billion dollars (*****I realize this may have changed since the House, will update before Wednesday*****) in tax breaks the proposed budget stands to pass out to the wealthiest Ohioans, and this while hard-working students are laboring under the heavy burden of debt for the crime of pursuing an education. This seems deeply unfair to me, and not only that, but there is no evidence that giving tax breaks to people that don't need them has any economic benefit to our state.

The Ohio Student Association has an alternative proposal. We have a simple four-point plan.

- Put 1 billion back into state funding for public colleges and universities
- Put 1 billion into community colleges and workforce development
- Put 1 billion back into OCOG, the Ohio College Opportunity Grant to expand need-based financial aid
- Put 1 billion more into the Student Debt Relief fund. Offer student debt tax credits to students who choose to stay in Ohio after graduation to incentivize them to stay in the state, get a job, or start a business and create jobs for others.

There you go. A simple four-point plan to invest that would make Ohio's higher education system the best in the nation, and boost our economy far more than tax giveaways.

Making these changes would provide us with actions that match our words, and a budget bill that better reflects our values. If we don't invest in the future, we will not have one.

I thank you very much for your time, and will now answer any questions you might have.