

Testimony on House Bill 49

Ohio House of Representatives Finance Committee' Subcommittee on Higher Education
Representative Rick Perales, Chair

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Chair Perales, Ranking member Ramos, and Representatives Anielski, Antonio and Duffey, my name is Nigamanth Sridhar and I am a professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at Cleveland State University. I am the President of the Faculty Senate at Cleveland State and I also serve as a member of the Ohio Faculty Council which represents the faculty at all of the four-year public universities in the State of Ohio. Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today to give a faculty perspective from Cleveland State on some of the aspects of House Bill 49 that pertain to higher education. I hope to reinforce some of the points that Dr. Krane has made by presenting specific examples of actions by the CSU faculty.

Reducing Textbook Costs

On behalf of the faculty at Cleveland State University, and on behalf of faculty members at all of Ohio's public universities, I respectfully submit that the proposal that public two- and four-year institutions in Ohio provide all textbooks to their students be removed from House Bill 49. The faculty at Cleveland State are acutely aware of the burden that expensive textbooks place on students, especially when such costs are presented to students separate from the tuition and fee costs. In April of 2016, the CSU Board of Trustees asked the faculty for a report that captured what the faculty were doing to address this burden. Since that time, there is also an active faculty-led task force that is solely focused on the issue of reducing the cost of textbooks and other instructional materials for the students. I would like to take a few minutes of your time today to list some of the more successful faculty-led initiatives to reduce costs.

A number of faculty in a variety of departments choose to use older editions of textbooks. This has a *significant* impact on the out-of-pocket expense for the student. For example, for our introductory biology course, the latest edition of the textbook costs well over \$200. The same text, two editions back can be purchased from a number of sources on the Internet for under \$10. The instructors provide the students with an addendum that points out key things that may have changed since the time the older edition book was published.

Some disciplines move too fast to take advantage of older editions of texts. For instance, in the field of software engineering (a subject that I teach), an edition of a text published five years ago may include severely obsolete information to the point that the older edition is not useful to student learning. However, we have worked with our library and with Ohio LINK to find books that are available to students electronically at no additional cost. At CSU, well over 10% of the courses make this option available to our students, and this percentage is only increasing every term. The CSU library works with faculty actively in helping faculty members choose textbooks that are also available in free electronic editions.

A third strategy that has worked well (in our Mathematics department, for example) is for the department to negotiate directly with the publisher, and use a portion of the fees that students already pay to purchase instructional materials for *all* students. In this manner, the student is able to anticipate the fee, and plan accordingly so that every student already has the text and other additional materials on the first day of class.

The last example I present today has to do with open access textbooks. There is an increasing number of faculty members across the university who are utilizing freely available, open-access textbooks. Now, this does not work across the board in all disciplines. However, wherever appropriate, and where the quality of the textbook material is appropriate, faculty members are choosing to use these.

Chair Perales, I present these multiple examples of strategies that our faculty members at CSU are utilizing to illustrate the variety of creative ways that we have found to reduce the cost burden that textbooks place on our students. My colleagues and I are always on the lookout for any and every avenue that we can explore, if it can reduce the cost of textbooks for our students. Requiring that universities provide textbooks to students is a “one-size-fits-all” approach (that may potentially fit no one very well) takes away choice and the flexibility to explore new possibilities, and handicaps the faculty body and only to the potential detriment of the student population. Furthermore, this proposal will lay waste to the investments of time, effort, and resources that our faculty body has made into lowering the cost burden on our students.

State Support for Higher Education

The proposed increase of 1% in the State Share of Instruction, while welcome, is still inadequate if we want to meet the state’s attainment goal. At CSU, we have worked hard over the last several years with a singular goal of increasing graduation rates and retention rates. We have made progress, increasing our graduation rate from 29% to over 40%, and increasing our fall-to-fall retention rate to above 70%. Our commitment to the College Completion Plan keeps on a path to raising these rates even further. CSU has been nationally recognized for our efforts on student success. There is an incredible amount of collaboration among the faculty, advising staff, and the CSU administration to ensure that all available resources are invested to ensure better student success metrics. With tuition frozen, the 1% increase, which is well below the consumer price index, these resources are only going to *decrease*, which will severely threaten our progress. Chairman Perales, we respectfully submit that the SSI increase should be in the range of 3-5% instead of the proposed 1%.

Competency Based Education

The last topic I will touch upon is the matter of competency based education, and the proposal in House Bill 49 that Western Governors University be considered “a state institution of higher education”. From our experience, student success is heavily driven by interactions with faculty members, both in classrooms as well as out. CSU has explored avenues for competency-based and mastery-based education for a number of years now. For example, our Levin College of

Urban Affairs has several well established courses and programs that allow students to use prior experience to obtain coursework credit. We, as a faculty, are also aware of the myriad challenges that our students face, and stand ready to provide the best quality education at affordable costs. Chairman Perales, on behalf of the CSU faculty and faculty at all of Ohio's public universities, I respectfully appeal to you and your subcommittee that any student experience we provide to Ohio's students in the realm of competency-based or mastery-based education be driven by faculty members at Ohio's public institution. This brings more ownership and accountability to such programs, and will benefit our student population.

Chairman Perales and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you the perspective on behalf of the CSU faculty body on the proposed state budget. I would welcome any questions you might have for me.