

House Finance Higher Education Subcommittee

Dr. Dorey Diab's Testimony on HB 110

March 3, 2021

Chairman Cross, Ranking Member Howse, and members of the House Finance Higher Education Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Dr. Dorey Diab, President of North Central State College and Chair of the Ohio Association of Community Colleges Presidents' Council.

I appreciate the work of this committee and its members to thoughtfully consider the many issues and opportunities currently facing higher education. In particular, I want to thank you for recognizing the importance of workforce certificates and for supporting those students who choose to pursue a shorter-term credential that leads to an in-demand job.

Attached to this testimony you will find a Top 5 list of budget requests, which were developed in coordination with, and support of, the presidents from all twenty-three of Ohio's community colleges. I would like to review a few requests that are of particular importance, especially right now, as we work to help our communities recover following the pandemic.

First, I'd like to highlight, that while the state has always supported community colleges and universities offering associate and bachelor's degree programs, and we are very thankful for that, we receive no funding at all to help with our workforce training programs. These are the programs that allow community colleges to provide targeted, personalized solutions to local employers struggling to remain competitive. These are the programs that allow those same employers to encourage their best workers to expand their skills and knowledge to better serve the company. These are the programs that provide focused support for numerous industries – like healthcare, business, service industries, IT, public service and manufacturing. These are the programs that have helped train the front-line workers and first responders who have performed so admirably during the past year. At NC State, we're proud of every alumnus who has served our community during the pandemic.

I agree that these workforce pathways are deserving of the increased attention that the members of this committee are giving them, and hope that you will consider providing operational support to colleges providing these training opportunities in this budget. This could be accomplished through the use of federal stimulus funds in the short term. Over the long term, we would believe that the state needs to evaluate what a fair level of funding is, to ensure that the State of Ohio sends the signal that it values how much these programs help both students and local employers succeed.

Unfortunately, many of the students who are interested in pursuing these programs are not eligible to receive either federal or state financial aid. While some receive PELL awards, we believe strongly that all community college students should be eligible to receive an Ohio College Opportunity Grant award. OCOG would cover a significant portion of the cost of short-term training, help workers gain critical skills, allow companies to remain competitive and perhaps, most importantly, align with existing state policy. Providing financial aid for students pursuing a certificate or credential that prepares them for an in-demand occupation will help encourage more students - especially adult learners - to access these postsecondary pathways, quickly connect them to a rewarding career, and help bridge the education gap so many of our local employers struggle with each day. This is what the Ohio Association of Community Colleges is recommending with its Rapid Recovery Ohio Initiative (Rapid ROI). While we certainly do not deny the benefits of earning an associate or bachelor's degree, the reality is that many Ohioans simply cannot pursue these longer-term pathways – especially all at

once. Instead, we see more students who approach their education incrementally – beginning as young as middle and high school age and learning new skills throughout their careers.

As the committee has heard in previous testimony, enrollment in community colleges was down both nationwide and in Ohio. This is especially true among minority, adult, rural, and low-income populations, as seen in our North Central Ohio service region. As you may know the “K-Shaped” recovery has negatively impacted many of our students working part-time in hospitality businesses to pursue their education part-time. This caused many of our students in North Central Ohio and the state as a whole, to either reduce or suspend their education progress, as we all wrestled with the effects of the pandemic. However, with K-12 schools now re-opening, and vaccines expected to be widely available by summer, now is the time for us to be doing everything we can to encourage students to resume their education, because we are once again hearing of employers desperate to hire workers. The Rapid ROI proposal would allocate \$22.5 million in federal funding to Ohio’s community colleges. Colleges would use these funds, in combination with other private and public sources, to bring back 15,000 students whose education plans were disrupted by the pandemic. With these funds, we believe we can move them to graduation and employment within one year.

Finally, it has been difficult to predict enrollment trends for many community colleges this year. Although enrollment is down statewide, historically periods of high unemployment have led to spikes in enrollment for community colleges – often as high as 10% or 15%. National survey data suggests that individuals who have been economically affected by the pandemic are showing significant new interest in pursuing education or training to advance in their career. The state should consider this as a rare opportunity in its efforts to achieve a college attainment goal of having 65% of its adult population have a college certificate or degree by 2025. We have a window of opportunity with this population, a silver lining if you will in this dark COVID cloud, and we cannot miss it.

The vaccine supply is increasing every week. You may have heard in the news just yesterday that there will be enough vaccines for every adult in the U.S. by the end of May. I believe the lifting of the COVID-19 cloud could result in an enrollment surge at Ohio’s 23 community colleges.

I want to be clear that we are extremely appreciative of what the Governor and the Chancellor have recommended in this budget, both in terms of SSI funding and tuition policy. That said, as state revenues continue to come in above estimates, we would encourage you to consider investing some of that additional revenue with community colleges through the State Share of Instruction (or the requested new SSI in the Community Colleges line item) to help us better accommodate the influx of Ohioans who choose to invest in themselves through education over the next year.

We are extremely appreciative of the support the State of Ohio has provided in the current budget and during the pandemic. I encourage you to consider and support these additional requests. We believe they can help accelerate Ohio’s recovery from the effects of COVID-19. 2021 is a time for hope and a time for action. Community colleges are poised to provide this educational leadership for our students, for our businesses, and for our great state.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.