

**SB 135- Higher Ed. Reform**  
**State Senator Jerry C. Cirino**  
**Senate Workforce & Higher Ed Committee**

April 21, 2021

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Williams and members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony for Senate Bill 135. While this is a large bill with many components, I wanted to take the time today to highlight the main points of this bold plan to enhance higher education and workforce development in Ohio.

For many years in this state, families and students have looked to our higher education system to provide the greatest opportunity for furthering one's career, goals and aspirations. For many years in this state, families and students have looked to our higher education system to provide these opportunities at the best return on investment. While Ohio has been fortunate to have a robust higher education system, the number of students who are unable to obtain a degree, and at a reasonable price, is far too large.

One of the first issues our office looked to address in SB 135 was the amount of student debt a student incurs when going to a higher education institution in Ohio. In 2017, then-Attorney General DeWine convened the Student Loan Debt Advisory Group and in their June 2017 report stated that 66% of Ohioans who graduated leave college with student loan debt, with the average debt totaling \$30,239. This ranks Ohio 8<sup>th</sup> in the nation for largest proportion of college students with debt. An even more disturbing statistic is that 13.6% of percent of student loan borrowers in Ohio default on their student loans, higher than the national rate of 11.3%.

SB 135 offers several proposals that I believe could be instrumental in helping students and families not only leave college without a substantial amount of debt, but also in helping them explore additional lower cost options. One way SB 135 addresses this is through a regional partnership program between the four year and the two year public institutions. While similar partnership programs are currently available, SB 135 would require a four year institution to partner with one or more two-year colleges while giving the admitted student the option of completing their first two years of coursework at the partnered two-year college, while technically enrolled in the four year institution. The student would be given a two-year college price with counseling from the four-year institution to ensure the student is on track for the four-year institution. A second way this issue is addressed is through a College Credit Plus subprogram for apprenticeships. This would create and allow a CCP subprogram to be created where a student can participate in an apprenticeship while receiving college credit.

The second major issue that SB 135 aims to address is the large number of students who are unsuccessful in completing a bachelor's degree. My office and I examined data provided to us from the Ohio Department of Higher Education's "Six Year Success Measures for First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students at Ohio's Four-Year Campuses." In examining this data, our office found that for the Fall 2014 entering cohort, after removing those universities who have at

least a 65% of their students who have earned a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Ohio State, Ohio, Miami and the University of Cincinnati), only 47% of students from the remaining 9 universities had obtained a bachelor's degree within 6 years. In educational terms, this is a failing grade.

One of the possible reasons for this low percentage is the perception that attending a higher education institution is the only pathway for a student to obtain employment after high school. This is the result of many factors. SB 135 attempts to alleviate these concerns for students and families by requiring high schools to inform them of career fields that require an associate's degree or other certificate, as well as programs such as the ROTC. By providing these options in high schools, students can be presented with the full arsenal of options in obtaining a post-secondary education and a job.

SB 135 also proposes to combat low degree completion rates with the creation of a new "Second Chance Voucher Program." With this new program, our state can provide an intuitive way of allowing those who are unable to obtain a degree a second chance. We have heard testimony in this very committee, across Ohio and the U.S., on how to provide families with a livable wage. This can be accomplished by making sure those who were unable to complete a bachelor's degree program have an opportunity to obtain a meaningful education elsewhere. Students who fail to complete a degree program at a four-year university would receive a voucher for up to 50% of the tuition paid at the university adjusted to the community college cost per credit hour. If a university has a graduation rate of 65% or higher for the prior six-years, the university will be required to reimburse the student 50% of that voucher, with the Chancellor providing the remaining percentage.

A third important issue this legislation seeks to address is free speech in classrooms and throughout our educational system. There have been far too many stories in the past several years of students and faculty alike who have been intimidated, and in some instances, punished for something they have written, taught, or brought forward. Students should not be afraid to voice a conflicting opinion to their professors in fear of their grade suffering. Just a few weeks ago one of our own four-year public institutions was ruled against by the 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit for its punishment of a Shawnee State University professor in 2018. This professor was punished for not using a student's preferred pronouns, and was told he would receive further punishment unless he "articulates the university's ideological message." How are our students and faculty supposed to be provided the best avenues for expression and educational freedom when a state institution can punish one's freedom of speech because another person demands it? Because of this, SB 135 would require the creation of a due process system on each university, where students and faculty can bring forward any complaints of violations with the comfort of knowing they will receive a fair and impartial hearing. Furthermore, SB 135 would require a uniform policy amongst the universities and colleges that provides students the broadest latitude to speak, write, learn and discuss any issue. We want to encourage debate on issues that impact our daily lives, but we do not want anyone, left or right, liberal or conservative, to be afraid to express their personal views due to the pressures of being punished for what one might say. As the 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit wrote in its Shawnee State opinion, "Traditionally, American universities have been beacons of

intellectual diversity and academic freedom. They have prided themselves on being forums where controversial ideas are discussed and debated. And they have tried not to stifle debate by picking sides.” This is an important opportunity to make sure that Ohio’s universities are examples of 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment supporters. Ohio universities must be beacons of free speech.

Lastly, one of the broader issues we chose to highlight in SB 135 is a uniform policy on transparency for higher education institutions that provides accountability. Some of this policy would include annual reporting from the institutions, as well as the Chancellor’s office, on various things such as admissions, revenue and the spending of said revenue, mental health services and spending, and campus security. While we understand that some colleges and universities may currently provide some, and in some cases all, of this information, SB 135 aims to provide prospective students and their families with the most accurate and accessible data as they make their decision where to continue their post-secondary education. Post-secondary education has had the largest percentage change as part of the U.S. household debt since 2003 reaching unfathomable levels of 546% by the end of 2020. It is our job as legislators to ensure that our constituents are provided the clearest picture of one of the largest investments they will be making in their lives.

Senate Bill 135 is not a global solution. Senate Bill 135 is not a silver bullet in addressing the student loan and workforce issues in our state. It is a step in creating a more effective, more accountable and more affordable post-secondary education system for the state of Ohio. This is legislation that we want Ohioans to be proud of. Far too many times in Ohio we are reactive: it is time to be proactive. As President Kennedy once said, “There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction.” Now is the time to take action.

Since I have introduced SB 135, we have had expressions of support from a multitude of educational institutions, school superintendents, businesses and other interested parties. We have also heard expressions of concern from groups, such as Ohio’s universities. It is my hope that we can work together to find common ground to move Ohio forward from the status quo.

Our higher education institutions in Ohio have done much good for Ohioans. SB 135 is designed to challenge education providers to improve outcomes, enhance choice and affordability, and to meet the needs of Ohio companies who depend upon our system to deliver the right skilled employees to help their businesses thrive and to produce a sustained and vibrant economy for all of Ohio. Thank you for allowing me to provide Sponsor Testimony on SB 135 and I look forward to working with everyone to make this bill even better. I would be happy to answer any questions.