



Testimony before the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee

Substitute Senate Bill 135

Wednesday, June 2nd, 2021

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Williams and members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee, I am Jack Hershey, President and CEO of the Ohio Association of Community Colleges. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Substitute Senate Bill 135 once again.

I realize it is a little unusual for an organization to return to provide additional testimony on the same bill, but OACC felt it was necessary to respond to some of the allegations and misstatements made last week by the lobbyist for Ohio's private colleges. To be clear, I am here today to advocate on behalf of Ohio's 23 community colleges, community college students and our employer partners. I am not here to further stoke any animosity toward any sector, institution, or type of student. Rather, I am here because leaders from all 23 community colleges felt it was necessary to set the record straight on many of the inaccurate and disparaging things said about the hard work that community colleges do in preparing our students for a meaningful and worthwhile career, and to thank our legislators for taking on this important initiative.

Last week, the relationship between community colleges and private universities was portrayed as a highly competitive one. From our perspective, the relationship is much different. While we obviously are both in higher education, there is little overlap between students who are attracted to most private universities and those that are drawn to community colleges. The reasons for this are many, including:

- The demographics of our student bodies are different, as we serve more non-traditional and/or underrepresented students (low-income, first generation, students of color and working adults), while the private university experience is aligned more to traditional college students who enroll directly from high school.
- Community colleges proudly embrace our open access missions, while many private institutions utilize a competitive admissions process and only admit a limited number of students.
- We also have very different cost structures, residential requirements, student life experiences, and more working adults who attend part-time.

This committee has heard me say this before, but community colleges are at the center of a diverse group of partnerships in the workforce training and higher education community. We work with local and regional employers, K-12 educators, human service agencies, and many different higher education institutions to provide a range of pathways that meet the diverse needs of our students. It's not always an easy task.

Community Colleges view our partnerships with private colleges and universities as a critical component to the success of the students and communities we all serve. Instead of competitive, we think the relations can best be described in a variety of roles such as:

- *Local Partners:* We partner on numerous external projects that benefit our local communities and employers. In addition, we often partner internally, including sharing or employing the same faculty members, which made the private college representative's attack last week on the perceived quality of community college instruction a little confusing at best.

- *Education Customers:* Community colleges often send their employees to private institutions to further their own educations, and this is especially true for those universities that offer graduate or professional degree programs.
- *Transfer Pipeline:* Thanks to the various transfer and articulation agreements that exist between our institutions, thousands of students every year who start at a community college transfer to private institutions to complete their bachelor's degree.

Part of what made last week's testimony so confounding was that it seemed to dismiss, or at the very least undervalue, the significant role that community colleges play in helping to increase both the enrollments and success rates of both public and private four-year universities. According to a 2017 National Student Clearinghouse study, more than 38% of all graduates who earned their bachelor's degree had been previously enrolled at a community college. Let me repeat that: Nearly 2 out of every 5 bachelor's degree graduates in Ohio were community college students at some point during their postsecondary educational journey. When these students graduate, we take pride in knowing that but for their local community college, they may never have reached that goal.

[AICUO Support for Existing Bachelor's Degree Programs at Community Colleges](#)

As stated earlier, we felt compelled to clarify some of the more pointed claims made in last week's testimony. Last week you heard that that the private colleges have never opposed any of the existing bachelor's degrees being offered by Ohio's community colleges, and that they found them "interesting, innovative and non-duplicative." While we appreciate that their opinion of these degrees may have evolved with further education, the private colleges clearly opposed the degrees currently being offered at Cincinnati State, Clark State and North Central State, and specifically referred to them as "duplicative" and asked the Chancellor to wholly reject their approval. These comments are still publicly posted on the Ohio Department of Higher Education's website.

I am not raising this to get into a back and forth, but the private colleges' efforts to block the creation of a new community college program worked against the workforce needs of local employers, all of whom enthusiastically supported the approval of those degrees. If the private colleges now realize the value in these degrees and that opposing them was a mistake, that change of heart further validates the wisdom of the changes in SB 135 that remove state higher education associations (including OACC itself) from the academic degree approval process.

Let me just conclude this section with a point of pride. This spring, community colleges across the state graduated their very first students with bachelor's degrees, within just two years of approval. We are incredibly proud of the success of these students, and we look forward to continuing to offer these accessible, affordable, and flexible pathways to bachelor's degrees available to more students.

[Bachelor of Science in Nursing Degrees](#)

[Approval Process](#)

One of the claims made last week that we felt was important to address were the inaccuracies over how SB 135 would supposedly eliminate all aspects of the approval process for BSN degrees. The truth is that as public community colleges, we are required by existing Ohio law to follow the degree approval process outlined in detail within *ODHE's Guidelines & Procedures for Academic Program Review Manual*, last updated in July of 2016. SB 135 does not exempt us from those requirements.

Those procedures outline the numerous quality control steps that must be completed before a degree proposal is ever forwarded to the Chancellor for consideration. This process starts with a review to ensure that all the General Standards for Academic Programs are met. This includes a review of accreditation status, governance policies, academic policies, student support services, general education requirements, faculty credentials, faculty capacity, program curriculum, student assessment policies, evidence of workforce relevance, and overall program budget and facilities.

Part of the review process for any degree also includes a site visit by a team of independent consultants, who are selected by the Chancellor. At the conclusion of the site visit, these consultants present the college with a report of every issue that they feel must be addressed before the proposal can move forward. Those recommendations are binding, and they must be addressed for a proposal to move forward to the Chancellor's desk for approval.

In other words, there are numerous quality control steps that take months of internal review to complete, which are then validated through an external review by consultants of the Chancellor's choosing, before any degree is ever forwarded to the Chancellor's desk for consideration. Again, none of that changes if SB 135 becomes law.

What Senate Bill 135 does say is that after that quality review of the proposed degree is completed, and both the Chancellor's staff and outside consultants agree that all the General Standards for Academic Programs are met, and all the additional requirements placed only upon community colleges under ORC 3333.051 are met, that then (and only then) shall the Chancellor approve any Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree program forwarded to them.

This is the appropriate way for the legislature to influence the process. If SB 135 passes, you are still leaving the quality review to ODHE, the Higher Learning Commission, and national nursing program accreditors. However, you are saying to your local health care employers that you believe them when they say a nursing shortage exists, and you want to do something to help fill this gap so that Ohioans can have access to the skilled patient care they deserve.

By following the same quality assurance process that every degree proposal at a community college, public university or private non-profit university follows, we will not turn into "diploma mills" as was so rudely suggested, nor will we run afoul of accreditation standards from the Higher Learning Commission, which is already very familiar with and supportive of this existing process. Additionally, to call into question the quality of current nursing programs at our colleges is simply not substantiated by the data. According to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, the 2019 passage rate for the MCLEX Nursing Licensing exam for community college graduates was 87.5%, compared to the statewide average of 84.4% for AND graduates.

To state it plainly, the Ohio Department of Higher Education will have multiple opportunities to stop a proposed program before it ever reaches the Chancellor's desk, if in fact it does not meet the quality requirements established in Ohio law. If Senate Bill 135 were to pass there is absolutely zero risk of a wholesale, statewide loss of accreditation, Pell Grants, and federal financial aid for every Ohio student. The argument that SB 135 will put accreditation at risk for every single public and private college or university appears to be a completely unsubstantiated and disingenuous scare tactic. Believe me when I say that maintaining accreditation is at the top of every higher education leader's priorities, regardless of the sector, and it is frankly rather offensive to suggest otherwise.

Lack of Clinical Spots

The committee also heard last week that a lack of clinical spots was a reason not to allow community colleges to offer the BSN. The truth is that moving existing nurses into a BSN completer program does not greatly increase the need for clinical spots. We believe that our programs will mostly attract practicing nurses who will come to us already possessing enormous amounts of applied experience in patient care. Furthermore, with most community colleges already offering the Associate Degree in Nursing, the clinical requirements are already met through existing partnerships. The only additional clinical experiences that these nurses will need are highly specialized, such as community health nursing, and those can mostly be done outside of the hospital setting.

In addition, the hospitals who are so enthusiastically supporting our ability to offer these programs have committed to us their willingness to do whatever it takes to improve the number of BSN completers, including assisting with additional clinical capacity. These kinds of solutions are possible when you maintain an ongoing, healthy relationship with hospital leadership and commit to work through creative solutions, instead of simply blaming hospital CEOs for their own workforce shortages because they are not innovative enough or willing to spend enough time on this issue as was alluded to by the private colleges last week. That statement simply does not ring true with any of the hospital CEOs that our colleges work with.

Additional BSN Claims

I realize that some of the issues raised by opponents of this law change may have led to some confusion. While we have chosen to only go through some of the more misleading statements today, attached to our testimony is a more comprehensive list of claims that have been levied by those opposing allowing community colleges to offer BSN programs. We hope you find this information helpful in your deliberations on this important workforce issue.

Insulting Statements about Community College Students

Finally, I want to address what all our community college leaders felt was the most offensive aspect of last week's testimony - which many viewed as an attack on our students, the struggles they face, and the varied different paths they take towards a degree. It accomplished nothing but perpetuate the stigma of community colleges and our students that we are all fighting so hard to end.

First, to label most of our students as failures by judging them based upon on-time completion rates shows a surprising ignorance about who community college students really are. More than two-thirds of our students attend part-time. They are older than traditional college students. They have families. They have jobs. And far too many of them struggle with housing and food insecurity. More than half of our students pay for college with the money they make from their current jobs, and they often take entire semesters off, or reduce course loads until they have the money in hand to take additional classes. They don't often finish on time, but when they do... well, you will never see more joy on the face of another human being than when you see someone who has persevered and struggled through all those challenges and is able to walk across the stage, shake the hand of their community college president, and receive their diploma. As one of our presidents described it, when you hear a scream from the audience of "way to go Mommy or Daddy," you know for sure that the journey was worth it.

Last week's testimony could not fathom why one of our students would be better served by taking a flexible program that allows them to go part-time and take "six to eight years" to complete a BSN at a community college, instead of enrolling in an inflexible and expensive program that starts with

an expectation that they be a full-time student, with a total disregard for everything else happening in their life. That statement shows such a fundamental lack of understanding of the hardships that many of our students face that it has raised new questions about whether institutions who stand behind those statements have a culture that is in fact welcoming to our graduates.

To be fair, community colleges consider themselves on a continuous educational journey to learn how to better serve and support our students. We do this because we are committed to doing a better job to help our students complete whatever goals they set for themselves. In recent years, that journey has led us to implementing more holistic advising programs that serve the person, not just the student. Many community colleges have opened food pantries and implemented emergency aid programs. We have increased our partnerships with social service agencies, faith-based organizations, and Job and Family Service Offices.

We have worked with local employers to increase the availability of Learn and Earn models so that the student knows that both their community college and their employer will have their back as they pursue a higher education. By implementing these strategies, community colleges have seen on average a 10% increase in graduation rates from 2013 to 2019. To criticize those gains, instead of celebrating them, is a puzzling strategic decision to make on behalf of institutions that routinely tell us how anxious they are to accept our graduates.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to come in today to both set the record straight and defend our students. Also, I extend a special thank you for the statements that were made in response to last week's testimony. I want you to know how much those were appreciated by the leaders of Ohio's community colleges. I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.



Community College Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) Programs

CLAIM: Ohio is already overproducing RNs, so allowing community colleges to offer BSNs will produce graduates who will not have a job.

REALITY: Ohio has faced a nursing shortage for years and recent events will only make the workforce need even greater.

- Hospitals are begging for more BSNs in order to be meet “Magnet Status” for higher quality standards and reimbursement rates.
- Due to both the aging of the workforce and burnout caused by the Covid pandemic, healthcare employers are bracing for a wave of nursing retirements.

According to the Ohio Board of Nursing’s 2019 “Ohio Workforce Data Summary Report,” 29% of all RNs were 55 years or older (more than 17% were age 65+).

On May 1st alone, there were more than 4,000 job postings in Ohio for nurses with a BSN according to Burning Glass’ Labor Insight Data.

- 56% of all current job openings required a BSN.
- Since there is a shortage of BSNs, hospitals often hire RNs with an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) with the stipulation that they obtain the BSN within the first 3-5 years of employment.

CLAIM: Community colleges do a poor job preparing students for their nursing careers so allowing them to offer BSNs will harm student success.

REALITY: Of all the claims, this is perhaps one of the more blatantly misinformed ones. The data simply shows a completely different reality. According to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, the 2019 passage rate for the NCLEX Nursing Licensure Exam for graduates of Ohio community colleges was 87.5% - ***community college graduates outperformed the ADN state average passage rate of 84.4%.***

The quality of our nursing schools is recognized by education experts across the nursing field. In the 2021 Best Ranked RN Programs, an annual ranking of the best nursing schools based on a review of nursing and education experts through RNCareers.org, 16 of the top 25 ADN programs in Ohio were offered by one of our community colleges. Yes, 16 of the top 25. Simply put, our colleges are leaders in preparing students to successfully advance in their nursing careers and claims like this are nothing more than an attempt to advance an elitist stigma that community college programs and students are lesser than those at other colleges or universities.

CLAIM: Allowing community colleges to offer BSN programs will flood the market with new programs already available through a university.

REALITY: The proposal will more efficiently utilize the state’s public higher education system to meet employer’s needs, which is what it is supposed to do. Community Colleges already have existing

associate nursing degree programs, and by adding a BSN completion option, more students would have improved access to a BSN education at a much more cost-effective price.

Without this option:

- ADN students who wish to earn the BSN often seek online programs from non-Ohio colleges.
- Many ADN students do not seek the BSN as they do not wish to be distance education students without some face-to-face services.
- High costs associated with BSN options are prohibitive to many ADN students who have family responsibilities.
- For employers who provide financial support for ADN to BSN education, the community college option would provide significant cost savings.

CLAIM: Community colleges won't be able to afford to offer BSNs at their low tuition rates.

REALITY: This exact claim was made when the initial law was passed several years ago that first authorized community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees. The reality is that we now have 10 bachelor's degree programs currently being offered at 7 Ohio community colleges – and they are being offered at the exact same low tuition rates as associate degree programs. Community colleges have already proven that bachelor's degrees can be offered under a lower cost model.

Despite what some opponents must believe, colleges do not start new academic programs in a vacuum – each institution performs its own cost-benefit analysis and other fiscal tests to ensure the program can fit within their proposed budget and not risk state or national accreditation problems. Community Colleges have full confidence that BSN programs can be offered at existing tuition rates, especially since they are already incurring many of the faculty, facility and other capital costs through their existing ADN programs.

CLAIM: There will not be enough space or slots for clinical education sites.

REALITY: ADN students are most likely practicing nurses with a wealth of experience. When they enter BSN completer programs, only very specialized clinical experiences are needed such as community health nursing, which is done outside of the hospital setting. Hospitals have repeatedly said they are committed to assisting higher education institutions improve BSN completers and are ready to assist with clinical access capacity.

Additionally, clinical slots are currently being filled regardless of ADN or BSN. As with any community college bachelor's degree, the law requires the college to work with all employers to commit to both experiential opportunities (i.e. clinicals) and hiring graduates before the program can be approved.

CLAIM: Accreditation will be jeopardized.

REALITY: All nursing programs are offered at colleges and universities must meet the exact same requirements of our regional accreditor (Higher Learning Commission).

Each program also must satisfy accreditation requirements of the national Accreditation Commission for Accreditation in Nursing (ACEN) and the Ohio Board of Nursing.

- Community College BSN programs would need to meet the exact same standards of the same accreditors as universities.
- For example, ACEN also accredits Baccalaureate Degree programs and is currently the accreditation agency for Youngstown State University and Shawnee State University.

SB 135 does not simply allow any degree program to be automatically offered. Community colleges must still meet all state laws and program approval processes, as well as state and national accreditation requirements. The fear that this law change will encourage “diploma mills” is simply a fallacy.

CLAIM: Community Colleges will not be able to hire nursing faculty.

REALITY: This claim simply ignores that our faculty are already qualified to teach the ADN and BSN by trying to perpetuate the stigma that community college faculty as “lesser than” their university peers.

Like universities, it is true that community colleges have long faced challenges to meet the shortage of advanced degree faculty in order to meet accreditation requirements. Because of these expectations, all schools of nursing have developed successful faculty recruitment strategies and are well positioned to meet the additional demands for new BSN programs.

- Innovative “grow-your-own strategies” are well established as colleges have supported faculty in advance degree attainment.
- Regional healthcare industry needs have also provided many solutions, such as staff sharing, to provide colleges with qualified nurses to fill any employment gaps. This dedication to solution generation underscores the commitment hospitals have in improving the pipeline of nurses as a key workforce development strategy.

CLAIM: Allowing community colleges to offer BSNs is not a financially prudent use of state resources and confuses missions of community colleges and universities.

REALITY: First, the reason so many RNs are not able to obtain their BSN is because none of the current BSN programs are financially prudent for too many students, families and/or their employers. Allowing community colleges to offer a BSN would provide more access to working, nontraditional students by offering affordable, local, flexible BSN programs.

Furthermore, to increase postsecondary offerings, the state has long allowed universities to offer associate degrees, certificates and credentials at a higher price point than are traditionally offered by community colleges. Community Colleges are not questioning whether this is “mission creep” on the part of universities that leads to a financially inefficient use of state resources, because we know that local employers also need those graduates.

Ultimately, Ohio employers want a system that produces the workers they need. The universities currently offering BSN degrees have not been able to meet these needs, which is why so many employers are supportive of allowing community colleges to begin offering BSN programs to help complement the current BSN programs being offered.

CLAIM: Community College BSN programs will be harmful to public and private four-year institutions.

REALITY: BSN programs at community colleges will complement, not compete, with university nursing programs. The data shows that the demand for BSNs is so great that university and community colleges must all expand their capacity to produce BSNs. Allowing community colleges to offer BSNs is no

different than the decision several years ago to allow universities to offer ADNs, which was done at the time to meet the industry's needs.

Because community college BSN programs will be significantly more affordable, we will likely attract a much different student than one who wants the "traditional" college experience over 4-5 years. Our students will likely be older working adults with families seeking a more affordable, flexible, and local option to earn their BSN. Moreover, these same students will be attracted to the face-to-face, student centered faculty that taught them in their ADN programs.

New accessible and affordable pathways to a BSN should be embraced, not feared.

