



Ohio Conference of the American Association of University Professors

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Testimony of Lisa Voigt, PhD
Ohio Conference of the American Association of University Professors
Before the Senate Financy Committee
Senator Matt Dolan, Chair
May 16, 2023

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Skyes, and Members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Lisa Voigt, and I am a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University. Today I am speaking on behalf of the Ohio Conference AAUP, which represents more than 6,000 college and university faculty at both public and private institutions of higher education across the state, to provide testimony on House Bill 33, the state operating budget.

Our association urges this committee and the full Senate to restore the higher education funding levels and programs to what Gov. DeWine proposed in his executive budget. Governor DeWine, Chancellor Gardner, and their staffs put forth a thoughtful higher education budget that would make major strides in access, affordability, and quality education for Ohio's students. The executive budget was one that puts resources in the hands of students and rewards institutions when students achieve.

The House version of the budget cuts more than a half-billion dollars from the governor's proposed higher education spending, seemingly, to pay for tax modifications. The vast majority of Ohioans will not experience a substantial benefit from another tax change, but Ohioans certainly see a benefit when tuition is kept low and they are able to attend college without incurring substantial debt.

It is important to be reminded of the purpose public colleges and universities serve and why they deserve investment. A college education used to be for only the privileged few. Public institutions were created to provide all citizens with the opportunities to advance their educations and to enter careers that otherwise would have been unattainable. Our public institutions used to have very low tuition or were even tuition-free.

Today, however, students are accumulating substantial debt to fund their educations. Ohio ranks second for the percentage of the state population holding student debt, at 15 percent, and the average student loan balance is nearly \$35,000.¹ This debt inhibits our economy if students saddled with tremendous debt are unable to buy homes or cars or to start families—even well

¹ <https://advisorsmith.com/data/states-with-the-highest-student-loan-debt/>

after they have graduated. Rising tuition costs, and the resulting student debt, are driven by state disinvestment. From 2001 to 2021, Ohio's inflation-adjusted spending per full-time equivalent student decreased by 29 percent – a decline more than three times the national average.² If Ohio is serious about attracting and retaining students, as well as increasing the number of degree-holders, we must do better. The executive version of HB 33 would put us on the right path.

The substantial proposed increase to the Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG) by the governor is much-needed and long overdue. This increase would, in fact, create opportunity for lower-income students to attend four-year institutions. We also support the creation of a need-based aid program for students attending two-year institutions. For years, we have pointed out that students who attend community colleges and regional campuses – most often the entry point for students with the greatest financial need – have been ineligible for OCOG or similar, need-based aid from the state.

Ohio's public colleges and universities are in every area of Ohio – rural, urban, and suburban. They provide good jobs, and they have helped to create and sustain the middle class, the backbone of our economy. Without increased investment from the state, we will see the academic missions of our colleges and universities continue to be undermined through faculty and program attrition. We also will see the loss of good-paying staff jobs, many times in regions where such jobs are scarce. Investment in higher education always generates significant returns – not only for graduates, but also for the communities in which the institutions are located, and for the state as a whole.

Ohio must strive for greater affordability, but we also must ensure quality. We are competing in regional, national, and international educational systems and economies. Quality higher education, in part, means having robust full-time faculties and program offerings. Full-time faculty contribute in every way to institutions – teaching, research, scholarship, service, and student advising. We provide stability at our institutions.

Unfortunately, quality has been at risk for decades as institutions have reduced full-time faculty and either haven't replaced those positions at all or have replaced them with part-time faculty, also known as adjuncts. Adjuncts are often good instructors, but because they are paid poverty wages and permitted to teach only a couple of courses at any one institution so that the institution can avoid providing healthcare coverage and other benefits, they are typically trying to piece together a living by teaching at multiple institutions. They usually do not have the same strong ties to a single institution and are not as available to meet with students outside of the classroom as full-time faculty do. They also have neither the time nor the funding to take part in important professional development activities.

By our best count, since early 2020, over 500 full-time faculty positions have been terminated at Ohio's public colleges and universities, and at least a few hundred more positions have been eliminated through attrition and early retirement incentives. The result of these reductions is that

² <https://nces.gov/indicators/states/indicator/state-support-for-higher-education-per-fte-student>

many students are paying more in tuition and fees, yet much less of that money is being spent on their instruction. We must ensure that State Share of Instruction (SSI) is, in fact, being spent on instruction.

The piece of paper that someone receives when they earn a degree is not education. College graduates have better lifetime earnings than those with a high school diploma only because of the skills that faculty help them to develop, such as critical thinking and communication, which are vital to graduates no matter which field they enter. We must not lose sight of that indisputable reality by watering down the rigors of a college education.

Ohio's faculty are proud of the role that we play in educating Ohioans – in preparing them to enter the workforce and to be good citizens. As our state continues to attract and to keep employers, as well as to foster communities in which people want to live and work, we should not forget the critical role played by high-quality, affordable colleges and universities. Higher education is a public good that benefits everyone, directly and indirectly. The educated, skilled, well-rounded, and adaptable citizens that our colleges and universities help to produce are crucial to Ohio's success.

For too long, higher education has been treated as less than a priority in the state budget, when what we need, at the very least, is a consistent expectation of funding. The impacts of disinvestment are glaring: dramatic enrollment declines, increased tuition and student debt, and reductions in academic programs and faculty positions. We hope that the Senate will restore the governor's funding in HB 33 and recognize that this could indeed mark a new day for state support of higher education. We also urge this committee and the full Senate to avoid making HB 33 the vehicle for other pending higher education bills, which deserve full and thorough vetting and additional public input.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions.