



Todd A. Diacon

President

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide interested party testimony regarding House Bill 33 (HB33) on behalf of Kent State University. My name is Todd Diacon and I am the president of Kent State University.

There are a lot of great things happening at Kent State University, and I know that our accomplishments are mirrored by similar accomplishments at the other Ohio public universities. At Kent State in the past year, we were named a Research One university, one of only 146 such institutions in the country, five of which are located in Ohio. We were recognized nationally for our excellence in enrolling and graduating first generation students, and we created the Kent State Center for Advanced Air Mobility as we continue to lead the state and indeed the nation in pilotless drone research.

However, I'm not here today to brag on Kent State. Instead, I am here today to provide some clarity on data. Why?

Because, from my vantage point, things are going well at Kent State, and I believe the data backs up that claim. And yet, as I have met with legislators over the last several months, I am left with the impression that some think we are not doing our jobs well, and that funds supporting higher education might be better spent elsewhere within the state's budget. When I try to get to the bottom of these beliefs, I'm confronted with facts and figures that I don't recognize, that I know do not apply to Kent State, and/or that are national figures which are not reflective of Ohio's higher education landscape.

And so, I am in front of you today with this request: as you make your decisions, and cast your votes, I hope you will do so based on accurate data...data shown to indicate quality and accomplishments, and data that is verified, verifiable, and that goes well beyond the anecdotes and anecdotal evidence that seems to drive perceptions and misperceptions. Thank you for allowing me to do this, and in order not try your patience today I will limit my examples to these three items: 1) student debt, 2) the time to degree (the average amount of time it takes to earn the undergraduate degree), and 3) the key student success indicators of freshman to sophomore retention, and, of course, graduation rates.

I'm hearing in my meetings in Columbus the very right and reasonable concern about student debt. And let me begin by noting that I am famous on our campus for saying this: "the challenge of borrowing money and earning a college degree is exceeded only by the tragedy of taking out

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loans but not graduating.” The latter is a total fail...not on the part of the student, but on our part.

At our Kent campus 31% of our students graduate *without contracting any student debt*. Let me say that again: 31% of our students who graduate do so without contracting any student debt. As a result, each year thousands of students earn a Kent State degree and leave campus without any student debt. Zero. And, of those students who do take out student loans, the average loan amount upon graduation is \$31,141. That’s a lot, and I am not minimizing that burden. To draw a quick comparison, the average cost of a new car is currently around \$48,000 and the average age of a vehicle on the road is 11 years. A college degree, with its one-time debt of \$31,000, lasts a lifetime. As an investment in one’s future, it seems to be acceptable, maybe even reasonable, and I think even wise given what we know the payoff will be in salary and earnings going forward.

A second notion I’ve been presented with of late is that it takes too long to earn a bachelor’s degree. For Kent State I can say this: the data demonstrates clearly that the time to earn a degree at our university is declining, and it is now below four years. On average, Kent State students on our Kent campus earn their bachelor’s degree in 3.8 years. Let me say that again, because I have heard numerous complaints of late that it takes too long to earn a college degree in Ohio: On average, Kent State students on our Kent campus earn their bachelor’s degree in 3.8 years. Nearly one-half of our first-time enrollees at Kent bring College Credit Plus credits and AP credits with them, and the average amount of college credit earned before enrolling now averages 18 credit hours, which is equal to one full college semester. I think we can all agree that earning a degree, on average, in less than four years is a success story for our students and for the state.

Ok, legislators will say when I give them this information...congratulations. But what about the spiraling cost of tuition, room and board? These costs are out of control, I’m told, and as such the legislature needs to clip our wings to stifle unnecessary spending on our part.

Well, let’s at least acknowledge what we do in these realms as dictated by the Ohio Revised Code. Under the tuition guarantee model, no public university in the state is allowed to increase tuition on any group of in-state students other than first time enrollees. In other words, we can raise tuition on an incoming class, but then that amount is frozen for the next four years. And, let me make this perfectly clear: for students who choose to live in university housing the same model applies to room and board for their four years.

Longitudinal research, by the way, demonstrates that students who live on campus perform better and have higher graduation rates than those who choose to live off campus. It is for this reason, and not because we seek more revenue, that at Kent State we require freshmen and sophomores whose homes are more than 50 miles from Kent to live on campus for their first two years. Of course, we allow for exceptions to this requirement, and everyone else is free to seek private housing, but they will likely seek yearly increases in rent, as opposed to colleagues who live on campus.

So in short, when you enroll in an Ohio public university you know that your charges for tuition, and for on-campus room and board will stay the same for the next four years. For the next four years! Where else in your personal budgets are you guaranteed the same costs for 4-years in a row?

Indeed, I know of no other business in the state with similar controls. Law firms raise their rates regularly. Same with medical providers. I do most of the grocery shopping in my household and let me tell you our supermarkets are raising their prices. Our suppliers certainly are raising what they charge us to purchase their products, products we must have to run the university. And yet, through it all, we cannot raise tuition, nor room and board on any in-state student for four years. We certainly have real, meaningful cost control at Ohio's public universities.

As we conclude, let me say that we are not perfect, far from it. We continue to improve, and our we are tackling numerous challenges, such as our current graduation rate of 65%. And while this graduation rate has improved from 47% in the year 2000, we can do better, and we will do better. And at any rate, given the performance funding model for the State Share of Instruction we only receive state support when students pass courses and when they graduate, which is a powerful and built-in accountability measure that few other states possess.

In conclusion, as you consider the budget bill before you, I hope that you find these specific data points about Kent State University helpful. The achievements at Kent State in retention and graduation rates, and the lowered time to degree over the last ten years would not be possible without the state's investment in higher education.

Therefore, I respectfully ask that you restore the higher education provisions which were proposed in the Governor's 'as introduced' budget bill. Our successes demonstrate that this funding will be put to good use and will maintain our state's competitiveness nationally and globally.

Chairman Cirino and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB33, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.