

Testimony of President Rodney K. Rogers
Bowling Green State University
Ohio Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Ohio Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, it is an honor to be here with you today.

I am Rodney Rogers, and I serve as the president of Bowling Green State University. Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I appreciate the opportunity to share how we are working to ensure a BGSU education is a worthwhile investment for our students, their families, and the taxpayers of Ohio.

We know there is a conversation happening across our state and nation about the value of higher education - the time it takes to complete a degree, the amount of student debt, the career and life outcomes once one completes the degree and the ability of universities to adapt to the 21st century. I don't disagree with this discussion and, in fact, welcome it - we should absolutely be examining every dollar invested in higher education to ensure it is well-spent – both taxpayer funding and the significant investment our students and their families make in their education. For many – it is a sacrifice. As president of the largest enrolled university in northwest Ohio, it is a responsibility I don't take lightly – nor should anyone.

As you consider this budget, I ask that you reinstate many of the provisions in the governor's budget, which are performance- and outcomes based – as they should be.

It calls for a 3% increase in the State Share of Instruction each fiscal year, which would be \$5 million less in 2024 than the SSI funding we received 14 years ago, just before the cuts of the Great Recession. This is foundational funding, and it is critical for our students. It keeps education more affordable and accessible and allows us to be funded at a level where we can provide appropriate faculty, technologies and student support to ensure our students are career- and life-ready – not just for the first job, but for a career of change. That should be the role of a degree from a higher education institution.

SSI is an outcomes-based investment, allocated on our effectiveness in retaining and graduating students. In short – we have to do our part to earn this funding. At BGSU, we are proud that our retention rates continue to move upward with strategic investments in student success. We fully anticipate we will be over 80% for student retention this fall, which is an increase of more than 10% over the last decade.

Our students graduate on time, even early – we are not looking to keep students for years and years. At BGSU, an undergraduate degree takes, on average, 3.5 to 3.6 years to complete when we look at data over the last six years. Most of our students - 75% - earn their bachelor's degree in less than four years. This is due in part to the College Credit Plus program and the steps we have taken with more intentional advising and coaching.

Our Life Design program elevates this work. With significant generosity from donors, every student can participate in this program that provides a framework to design, and control, their college experience. Life Design allows students to accomplish two big goals: 1) to be empowered to navigate and successfully transition to college and consider career options, which requires intentional and holistic support. 2) to secure a meaningful and productive job for a successful career and life. That is at the core of a BGSU education, and we are proud that 98% of our students have a job, have started a business, or are in graduate school within six months of graduation.

The governor's budget calls for the expansion of OCOG eligibility and individual student awards. This transformative investment would reach the middle class for the first time. OCOG gives students and families a choice, which is precisely what this budget does in the K-12 space in the form of the Ed Choice voucher program. Expanding OCOG puts more control in the hands of middle-class families so that parents and their students can make a decision that is best for their future.

BGSU serves students from almost every county in Ohio, including the three Cs, and we have effectively fought the strong headwinds in enrollment and retention. Over the past several years, BGSU has grown the number of out-of-state students who come and stay in Ohio, increased enrollment in our hybrid and online programs, and experienced strong and stable overall enrollment. Last year, we had a 7% increase in our first-year class, and we are tracking a double-digit percentage growth in this fall's first-year class.

We have accomplished this by being adaptable and responsive to the needs of our students and families and the needs of Ohioans by investing in relevant, high-demand academic programs. For example, we have grown our aviation program, understanding the need for pilots. To address the shortage of nurses, we have expanded partnerships that allow us to graduate more nurses. To ensure that Ohio remains a strong manufacturing state in light of more onshoring and new industries coming to our state, we have elevated our programming in robotics, logistics and systems engineering. And to address the shortage of teachers, we have developed alternative educational pathways for students to become licensed to teach. We have absolutely been adaptable to remain highly relevant to the needs of Ohioans.

While national stories are constantly being written about the student loan crisis, BGSU graduates' average debt has decreased over the past five years, with \$21,819 now the median loan debt - less than the cost of a new Honda Civic, for perspective. And while the Civic has a good useful life, the investment in a college degree lasts a lifetime. Over the course of their careers, a BGSU graduate will earn about \$1.2 million *more* on average than individuals with a high school diploma – according to a recent economic impact study from Lightcast. That is an ROI of 16.2% - surpassing the average return on the stock market of 10.5% over the last 30 years.

That is a real value not only to our graduates – but to our entire state. Ohio's 14 public universities delivered \$68.9 billion in total economic impact in FY 2021-2022 – with BGSU's impact at \$3.1B, according to Lightcast. The economic impact of the state's public universities represents 8.8% of Ohio's total gross state product.

The study also found that Ohio's public universities generate significantly more tax revenue than they receive – about \$4.60 for each dollar Ohioans invest throughout students' working lives. The budget is an investment in Ohio's economic future and a critical component to the state's ability to continue attracting global businesses to our state, with the promise of a highly skilled, career-ready workforce.

We applaud the House for the addition of the Ohio Aviation Workforce Innovation Fund and request that the Senate maintain this funding. We also thank the House for fully funding the Rural University and Co-ops/Internships programs. BGSU's Center for Regional Development uses these funds for community engagement like the Reimagining Rural Regions initiative and the annual State of the Region. We request the Senate keep these line items fully funded and expand the support for the Center for Advanced Manufacturing, which will streamline resources across northwest Ohio to develop a highly skilled, deeper talent pool for our state's growing advanced manufacturing sector.

In addition to the workforce impact, BGSU faculty make a significant economic impact in leveraging and advancing their research and bringing technologies to market. For example, BGSU faculty member Dr. David Fulton developed FoxPro, which Microsoft acquired and became the foundational product we now know as the Microsoft Office suite of applications. Satelitycs, Inc. is another BGSU-grown enterprise that is rapidly expanding, helping critical industries such as oil and gas, pipeline, power and rail avoid issues with its geospatial analytics software.

I understand and appreciate the discussion on how we should fund higher education. But I would be remiss to only focus on the numbers and broad contributions. I have the great privilege of seeing, in real time, the impact of higher education. Many of our students are first-generation. When you look across our student populations, many rely heavily on federal and state dollars. Going to college is not a given for these students – but they work hard, often exceeding expectations. When they graduate, they grow businesses, pay taxes, have families, buy homes, improve communities, and strengthen our state and economy. In short, it opens the door to living the American dream.

To be clear, there are many paths to the American dream, and we absolutely must have a robust educational ecosystem in our state. As a native Ohioan, I believe this is our state's time. We have found a way to honor and leverage our past and embrace our future with innovation and hard work. Higher education will play a key role in the future of Ohio's economy and communities because of our graduates and research programs. We will absolutely drive economic growth, and we will do it with a student-first approach. I ask that you reinstate the governor's higher education budget - it's good for students, it's good for our future workforce, and it's good for Ohio.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony today, and I am happy to take any questions.