

Testimony of President Rodney K. Rogers
Bowling Green State University
Ohio Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
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Thank you for inviting us to speak with the Ohio Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee. We share a common goal: to ensure the future health of Ohio's public higher education institutions because of our shared belief in the importance of education to Ohio's future. I appreciate the opportunity to provide additional background on our capital budget requests as you consider this funding.

Bowling Green State University, along with Kent State, was established by the state as a teacher-training institution by an act of the legislature in 1910. At the time, our elected officials and the public recognized how important professionally educated teachers were to Ohio's future. Today, graduates of our BGSU College of Education work in nearly four out of every five school districts in Ohio, and we are the largest producer of teachers at a single site in the state.

We're proud of that impact and our heritage. However, like any successful organization or business, BGSU has evolved to become a high-research, comprehensive university. Higher education faces heavy headwinds. Public trust in higher education continues to decline. I believe that is one of the reasons we are here today. Unfortunately, trust in all public institutions is declining, and trust is critical for civilized societies. This can only be rebuilt with transparency and openness to change. Thank you for giving us this opportunity to take a step in that direction.

Higher education also faces the challenges of declining high school enrollments and college-bound rates. BGSU recognized this early and began adjusting our strategies nearly a decade ago. We embraced a growth mindset – knowing we had to do things differently – and we were innovative in what programs we'd offer, how we would leverage technology to deliver the programs, and how we would staff. We focused on growing programs in areas with a workforce and societal need, while scaling back in others.

The result has been stability in our enrollment and employee headcount over the last decade. The numbers you see reflect our headcount at fall 15-day, which is the traditional way to look at enrollment, but we have also included our 12-month enrollments, which better reflects how we operate as a university, with multiple entry points for students throughout the entire year, not just in the fall.

The stability and strength of our enrollment and employee headcounts have been good for the university, and the economy we support as the largest employer in Wood County and one of the largest employers in northwest Ohio at a single site. Recent data indicates that BGSU had a \$3.1 billion economic impact in Ohio, and we are an anchor institution for northwest Ohio. While there is a great deal of focus on the instability of higher education nationally, BGSU has leveraged our strength, and the confidence in BGSU, to build momentum in our enrollment, student success and outcomes, collaboration, and partnerships with businesses in northwest Ohio and the state. Our composite Senate Bill 6 ratio reflects this stability. We are not a wealthy

university like some of our peers that have existed more than 100 years longer than we have, but we make up for it with our work ethic and creativity.

Our approach is no different than any other successful business or organization. We have been disciplined in working our strategic plan and consistent with our objectives, and, along with our Trustees, holding ourselves accountable for achieving our goals. We launched our current strategic plan in 2018 – six years ago – based on the previous plan. We have been flexible in making adjustments – for example, after COVID, we accelerated some initiatives and eliminated others, allowing us to be one of the first universities in Ohio to return to in-person classes.

I want to note how fortunate we are in Ohio, as public higher education institutions led by our trustees, to be empowered to be flexible and adaptable. When you look at other states with systems for their public higher education, like the SUNY system in New York or the Cal State system in California, there is significantly more bureaucracy and, in turn, limitations on individual universities to be able to adapt as needed. I would like to acknowledge and thank you for providing this framework for us to be flexible – which has allowed us to be innovative and creative in how we serve Ohio. I believe it has been essential for BGSU’s continued success.

As a former businessperson who became an academic and a former business dean, strategic planning is critical for any organization. It is not always the most exciting, but for BGSU, it drives every decision. So, my comments today are guided and ordered by our strategic plan.

Our mantra at BGSU is we are a public university for the public good. How we serve our students and the public – the taxpayers who invest in us - is the backbone of our plan. There are four objectives: 1 – Redefining Student Success; 2 – Relevant Research, Creative Activities, Partnerships and Engagement; 3 – Empowering People and Community; and 4 – Driving Efficient and Effective Processes, Structures and Technologies.

Objective one - redefining student success - is ensuring we have relevant and in-demand academic offerings that are differentiated, an intensive focus on student outcomes, and we find ways to make a BGSU degree more accessible. We continuously evaluate our undergraduate and graduate programs to ensure we manage our academic portfolio. We look to Ohio’s workforce needs and identify what is sustainable for us.

For example, we have intentionally invested in high-demand academic programs in healthcare and applied STEM. BGSU has long offered nursing, computer science, and applied engineering, but we have reimagined our programs to meet Ohio’s workforce needs. In engineering, we are now offering Software, Robotics, Advanced Manufacturing, and Computer Engineering, creating a talent pipeline that positions Ohio as a continued leader in advanced manufacturing.

Partnerships have been critical in providing additional resources to allow us to grow. We recognized this need early and have strong, established private and public partnerships today. For example, we are one of the few universities in the country to have an airport on our campus. Although we have offered a flight operations program for decades, we recognized the pilot shortage and thought we could do more. Aviation training programs are expensive to operate, so

we partnered with North Star Aviation to grow our program. Currently, we have the newest training fleet of aircraft in the U.S. with a fleet of 19 aircraft.

Our partnership with Ohio-based Cedar Fair has allowed us to create our Resort and Attraction Management program – the only one of its kind in the nation. Students have opportunities for hands-on learning or can choose to complete the program online. It includes guaranteed, customized paid co-op opportunities in more than 20 departments at Cedar Fair parks across North America. Because of the uniqueness of this program, we are attracting students from across the country.

These programs are driving much of our enrollment gains – covering areas where we see declines – hence the stability in our enrollment. In managing our academic portfolio, we have proactively suspended enrollment in programs with low enrollments.

An intensive focus on student outcomes is critical. We have seen great gains in this area, achieving record retention and graduation rates over the past few years. Our average student debt is \$20,337, and nearly 80 % of our undergraduate degree recipients complete their degrees in four years or less. We are intentional about providing support services to each student, regardless of their background. If a student chooses BG and is willing to work hard, we will be there to support their success.

For example, we have a Division of Student Engagement and Success. We no longer have a Division of Student Affairs, which we believe is a more passive structure in supporting students. Instead, we reevaluated what our students needed and adopted a new, more proactive structure. This division empowers students to take ownership of their college experience and take advantage of what we offer.

This kind of support is a strategic investment. Graduating students is an important part of our work – perhaps the most important – but it is also critical for our financial health with SSI funding, dependent on graduation numbers.

Our strategic plan also calls for us to differentiate the student experience, which is critical for BGSU to keep enrollment steady. Six years ago, we looked at how to differentiate our work, anticipating national enrollment declines. Academics are the foundation of any university, of course, but academic programs are very similar from university to university – this is a requirement of accreditation. We also know there are many ways to prepare for a career outside of going to college.

We asked ourselves hard questions: what could we offer that was beyond career prep, that would prepare students for careers that don't yet exist? It was experience. Experience to build skills beyond the classroom and beyond traditional career preparation: study abroad, undergraduate research, living on campus, leadership and student organizations, community service. We also knew that we needed to empower students to navigate and design these opportunities, leading to higher levels of engagement, student success, and, ultimately, graduation.

We did our research and adopted a program that uses design thinking, a concept developed by entrepreneurs and widely used in business, to empower employees to identify and solve problems. We found a version that was adapted to education, and we brought it to BG in 2020. In 2022, we received a \$15M private gift from two alumni donors and former business executives to bring the program to scale.

Students work with coaches to build a toolkit on how to design their college experience and consider career paths beginning on day one of college. This helps students understand why they are in college, leading to them graduating on time, with less student debt, and getting the most out of their investment in college. We now offer this program to all our students, and to date, we are the only university in the country offering it at such a broad scale. This is absolutely a differentiator for us, and we are seeing students coming from out of state on college visits wanting to learn more about it.

We have invested in the student experience – and just this fall, the Wall Street Journal ranked BGSU the No. 1 university in Ohio – public or private, big or small – for the student experience. And, for the fourth consecutive time, we were ranked the No. 1 public university in the Midwest students would choose again.

Our last initiative in student success involves broadening access. We have done this by expanding our online program offerings and getting creative in how we offer our existing programs.

For example, we recently launched a Doctor of Physical Therapy program, which is traditionally offered in person. We created a hybrid program where students learn online and visit campus a few times a year for laboratory work. We offer it in an accelerated plan, allowing students to graduate faster and start working in this in-demand field. This has allowed us to cast a much larger net with students from across the country enrolled in this program.

Five years ago, with a looming teacher shortage, BGSU launched the state's first entirely online and only competency-based alternative route to licensure program to grow our K-12 teaching workforce. To date, this program has graduated 53 special education teachers, 15 math teachers, 18 science teachers, 9 world language teachers – all licensure areas experiencing significant shortages in Ohio. Next year, we will launch an online program for initial licensure in special education for place-bound students. This program will provide access and opportunities for rural and urban districts to meet critical shortages in their districts.

Objective two of our strategic plan is relevant research, creative activities and external partnerships. BGSU is a high-research, comprehensive university with the Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation and the Innovation and Economic Prosperity University designation from APLU. We believe our relevance should be judged in terms of impact, not just research expenditures.

Our research is focused. As one of only a few research centers focused on Photochemical science, our faculty's research has impacted the treatment of diseases, the design of protective wear for military pilots, and more efficient solar panels. Our nationally ranked programs in

Industrial-Organizational Psychology have helped companies develop new ways of evaluating and onboarding talent. The Great Lakes Center for Fresh Water and Human Health is working in watersheds and our Great Lakes to understand the impact of harmful algae blooms and identify remediation strategies. Our Center for Regional Development supports various county economic development offices throughout northwest and central Ohio with data needs and strategic planning. As a result of state support for the Reimaging Rural Regions program, the center provides free and low-cost assistance to rural communities, using tools and software they wouldn't be able to access on their own. The Ohio Attorney General's Center for the Future of Forensic Center is elevating the quality of forensic science for our state. Our Center for Family and Demographic Research advances research on the health and well-being of children, youth, and families. Our Center to Advance Manufacturing, in partnership with Owens Community College and the University of Findlay, assists companies throughout our region to connect and align educational and research resources to support their success.

We also bring our research to market. We have assisted our faculty in establishing 50 patents, with 21 more pending. Satelytics is one of the most successful startups based in northwest Ohio, and this work was based on our faculty's research in geospatial data science. Cincinnati-based LF Studios, one of the world's leaders in the design of immersive environments and experiences, was born from the work of a BGSU professor in our animatronics program.

Earlier, I shared a few examples of our academic partnerships, and we remain committed to fostering deep relationships that result in win-win opportunities.

Our third strategic plan objective is people and community. The first three words in our strategic plan in this area are inclusion, respect, and curiosity. Inclusion is everyone – all ideas, perspectives, and backgrounds. Respect is critical – higher education should never be “my way or the highway.” We learn from each other through curiosity and respect for all ideas.

As mentioned earlier, supporting our students, faculty and staff is a foundational objective in our strategic plan. We offer this support in many ways, through academic administrators, healthcare services, financial aid assistance, counseling, including mental health support, military, nontraditional, underrepresented student services, housing management, and staff focused on the DEI work. There are many examples of our work in this area. For example, earlier this month, we held Green Zone training for faculty and staff to help better understand their roles in assisting military students at BGSU. We are proactive in this work, and I'm proud to share that BGSU has again been ranked the No. 1 university in the Midwest for veterans and active military students, according to Military Times Best for Vets College rankings.

Lastly, we are focused on being efficient and effective. We are continuously looking to reduce the net cost of a BG education by flattening our organizational structure, redesigning curriculum, raising significant private support for need-based scholarships, and even lowering the cost of textbooks. We are also engaged in regional partnerships that provide additional resources. For example, BGSU outsourced our student health services, which the Wood County Hospital now leads.

We are also focused on right-sizing our campus and reducing our footprint. Over the past 15 years, we have removed nearly 1.1 million square feet of space on our campus. This has resulted in more than \$3M of annual operational savings. We continue to have buildings that we no longer need or are no longer suitable for renovation, which brings us to our capital requests.

As required, BGSU submitted our six-year capital improvement plan. Based on the IUC process to allocate specific capital dollars to individual universities, BGSU was provided a control total of \$17.6M. Using that smaller amount, BGSU prioritized our most critical needs.

Our first project seeks funding to renovate and enhance the existing Technology Building to create the Technology Engineering Innovation Center (TEIC). This project is critical to support our growing engineering programs, which is part of our strategic plan discussed earlier. Phase I includes the renovation of the existing east wing, as well as a complete upgrade to the infrastructure feeding into the building systems, including energy conservation measures, heat plant controls, central chilled water manufacturing, centralized emergency power generation, electrical emergency service upgrades, and building security-related upgrades. Phase II would include the demolition of the existing building's west wing.

Growing our engineering programs is an important strategic investment as we look to increase enrollments in our most relevant programs to support Ohio. Our current technology building simply can't support the advanced equipment needed in these advanced manufacturing programs. Already, we have educational equipment we can't turn on because the current building can't support the electrical needs without blowing circuits in the building. This is an essential project.

We also need to complete a critical technology rehabilitation of our wired network. Our current network faces multiple challenges – which would be debilitating if unaddressed. The current network does not support current or emerging security data protocols and is nearing the network capacity. This project greatly reduces our vulnerability to systemwide outages. This is absolutely an essential investment for BGSU.

Our third project includes essential updates to several of our most heavily used academic buildings, which are housing many of our growing STEM programs and research centers, including our Center for Photochemical Sciences and Great Lakes Center for Fresh Waters and Human Health – driving in-demand research being used by the military, health agencies, and major corporations. Most of these buildings have not had significant renovations since they were built 50 to 90 years ago.

While the current funding only supports the beginning of this project, ultimately, we will be able to right-size and modernize spaces in a targeted way. It will also address the backlog of deferred maintenance needs and reduce annual operating costs. By targeting rehabilitation and strategically relocating and consolidating multiple academic and support units, BGSU will be able to permanently demolish approximately 216,500 SF of additional academic buildings unsuited for adaptive reuse and with excessively high deferred maintenance.

Lastly, we are seeking funding to rehabilitate critical infrastructure systems and academic spaces on the BGSU Firelands campus, ensuring these buildings are safe and occupiable for our

students, faculty and staff. This project addresses the buildings most in need of renovation and will address the backlog of deferred maintenance for mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and building systems that have reached the end of their useful life.

These projects are critical to the continued health of BGSU, and I thank you for your time in allowing us to walk through these needs. I would also like to thank you for inviting us here today to talk about higher education in Ohio.

As president of BGSU, I meet with our students and alumni every day and see the impact of higher education. On a personal level, I am a fifth-generation Ohioan, but first-generation college student. Higher education certainly provided me with opportunities I would have never imagined possible.

I appreciate your work in ensuring Ohio continues to have a healthy, robust educational ecosystem, especially given the stories we hear about higher education in the news. I believe higher education is critical for our state's future, as having a skilled workforce will attract, and keep, businesses here. To do that, we will need to ensure higher education is available and accessible to all.

BGSU has been successful because of our ability to change and adapt quickly – we are fortunate to be in Ohio in allowing us to do that.

Thank you.