

Testimony for Ohio House Bill 95 - David Hibler, May 6, 2025

Hello, my name is David Hibler. I'm a Ph.D. candidate at The Ohio State University, a researcher in military health and engagement, and a proud Army veteran. I served as a combat medic in the Ohio National Guard, and I'll be graduating this year with my fourth scientific degree from OSU. That's a milestone made possible because of support from organizations such as the Military Community Advocate Program.

When I first enrolled at OSU in 2005, I was fresh out of basic training. Just two weeks into classes, I was cross-leveled into a new unit for a 15-month deployment to Baghdad. Like many Guard members, I spent months in and out of mandatory training missions across the country before mobilizing. There was no guidance on how to maintain academic standing while preparing for war, and OSU had no real infrastructure or support for military students.

Some professors supported me. Others berated me in front of classmates or refused to accommodate my absences, even when backed by military orders. As a young soldier, I didn't know my rights—and no one at OSU did either. I was left to navigate combat and college alone.

Despite repeated mobilizations that forced me to miss weeks of class each quarter, I earned dual bachelor's degrees. But my GPA suffered, and I was no longer a competitive med school applicant. During my 15-month deployment to Iraq, I had found a love for scientific research and I pivoted to a lab research career, eventually returning to OSU for my master's and PhD. This time, I found a completely different campus—one where military students had a voice, a community, and real support. That difference was the Military Community Advocate Program.

I've served as an MCA since 2018, making me the longest-serving advocate to date. I've built programs, mentored students, worked across three colleges, and created OSU's military graduate mentoring initiative. I've helped military students translate their experience into academic success, and helped faculty understand their legal and moral responsibilities to those who serve. Most recently, I've worked with OSU's Chronic Brain Injury Research Institute to develop mentor training programs tailored for military students recovering from PTSD and TBI—resources we never had when I started school.

Without the MCA program, I would not have made it this far. It gave me a place, a purpose, and a platform to serve others. Because of it, I was selected as one of OSU's top 150 students as a Sesquicentennial Scholar for OSU's 150 year anniversary, I was also selected as a Tillman Scholar, and last week received OSU's Graduate Associate Leadership Award for my work mentoring and leading students on and off campus. More importantly, I have helped dozens of other military-connected students find success.

During my undergrad time at OSU there was no support or community for military students. I struggled severely during that time, and the lack of support significantly and negatively impacted academic success, my career trajectory, and my ability to give back to my community at large. Not only was I impacted, but I watched as scores of my military siblings attempted to gain their college degrees but gave up or were forced to drop out because of similar difficulties to what I faced. This is

not only a disservice to those that give so much for us, but it is also a real harm to our society. Military personnel are highly trained and educated on tasks and skills that are often critical to society at large. This investment is often to the tune of hundreds of thousands of state and federal dollars per individual. Not only that, but they have a wealth of real-world experience that is not easily gained at such an early age in the civilian world. Not allowing for a smoother transition from the military into the civilian and academic environments where these skills and experiences can be honed to benefit civil society, is disgraceful and a waste of precious resources. Coming back to OSU for my graduate work, I finally saw a pathway being developed where this waste was being mitigated. Not only has the MCA program at OSU helped me to build my future career, provided me with institutional and financial support, and helped me find my community so that I could become successful, but it has allowed me to give back to my brothers and sisters in arms, and build up the next generation of military connected students to be stronger and have an even louder voice than I ever did.

Thanks to the establishment of the Military and Veterans Services office and their Military Community Advocate Program, the support that I received during my graduate time, was night and day different from my experience as an undergraduate. Now if a student has to miss class due to military service, they now have advocates. Faculty now have knowledgeable experts to talk to about concerns or legal requirements surrounding military students. We now have a supportive, engaged community where peers build one another up and pass on the knowledge they have gained. We have been able to elevate military students to high honorariums and positions such as scholarships, fellowships, seats on the academic senate and OSU's Board of Trustees. Military students at OSU now not only have a place in higher education, and a pathway to success, but they also have a voice and are actively helping to guide OSU's development into the future.

I've lived both realities—before and after the MCA program at Ohio State. One was isolating, demoralizing, and prohibitively costly. The other is now supportive, empowering, and transformative. This bill gives every college in Ohio the chance to offer that second path to military students across the state. It is an investment not just in student success, but in our workforce, our communities, and our collective future.

Thank you

David A. Hibler
