Ohio Excels

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House Workforce & Higher Education Committee

Testimony on House Bill 644

Kevin Duff, Executive Vice President, Ohio Excels

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Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Abdullahi, and members of the House Higher Education & Workforce Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony for House Bill 644.

My name is Kevin Duff, and I am the Executive Vice President at Ohio Excels. We are a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that engages and unites Ohio's business community to strengthen the education-to-workforce pipeline—from early childhood through postsecondary and into the workforce. We convene partners, conduct research, and advocate for policies that improve outcomes for Ohio students and better align education with workforce needs.

At Ohio Excels, one of our core priorities is ensuring that more Ohioans earn high-value credentials and degrees that lead to strong career opportunities. As you all know, research consistently shows that education and training for students beyond a high school diploma is essential for economic mobility. At the same time, the future of our state's economy depends on our ability to develop and retain a skilled workforce.

The state has done a lot to improve the accessibility and affordability of higher education over the past few years. However, that is not enough. We must ensure that students complete their programs.

Too often, students do exactly what we ask of them: they enroll in college, invest time and money, and take out loans. Yet far too many do not cross the finish line. The worst-case scenario is a student who disrupts their life to attend college, accumulates debt, and ultimately leaves without a degree or credential. That outcome is devastating for the individual—and it represents a missed opportunity for our workforce and economy.

To better understand this challenge, Ohio Excels conducted a poll in January 2023 of Ohioans who enrolled in college but did not complete. The most commonly cited barrier is not a surprise: 25% of respondents identified the cost of tuition alongside basic living expenses like housing and food as the primary reason they stopped college.

However, these former students pointed to many other reasons that, cumulatively, have a greater impact on their decision to stop their programs. For example:

- 22% indicated “I had to deal with a family commitment or emergency” as the primary reason they stopped.
- 9% said “I was not properly prepared academically for higher education.”
- 7% reported “I was not prepared for the nonacademic or social challenges for higher education”
- 5% answered “I didn’t know what major to pick or how to navigate the classes.”

This is exactly what House Bill 644 is designed to address.

The bill creates the Higher Education Evidence-Based Innovation Fund and Grant Program, which would support institutions in adopting proven, research-backed strategies to boost student retention and completion through a competitive grant process. Importantly, the bill requires that funded programs demonstrate measurable impact, include strong evaluation components, address sustainability, and focus on improving retention, completion, and workforce outcomes—particularly for low-income students.

One of the strongest examples of a model this grant program is advancing is New York’s ASAP program. ASAP provides students with a comprehensive set of supports, including financial assistance, structured pathways, proactive advising, and career guidance. The results are compelling. The City University of New York nearly doubled graduation rates through ASAP.

Here in Ohio, Lorain County Community College pioneered a similar model called SAIL. Lorain also doubled graduation rates. That level of clear impact and replicability is rare in education policy. We are fortunate to already have proof through Lorain’s leadership that replication can be done in Ohio.

House Bill 644 creates the structure to kickstart and continue scaling these proven models throughout the state. By prioritizing outcomes-driven investments and requiring rigorous evaluation, the bill aligns funding with what works and builds a stronger knowledge base for the future. This is an innovative and fiscally responsible approach.

Ohio Excels strongly supports House Bill 644 and the creation of the Higher Education Evidence-Based Innovation Fund and Grant Program. We believe this bill represents an opportunity to help more Ohio students complete a degree, strengthen our workforce, and ensure that our higher education system delivers real value for individuals and for our economy.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.