

## **Testimony Senate Higher Education Budget Hearing**

Ashley E. Nickels, Ph.D.

Private Citizen

Submitted: May 14, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Timken, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony. My name is Dr. Ashley Nickels, and I submit this testimony as a private citizen and Ohio voter. I also serve as an Associate Professor at Kent State University and am a parent of a rising college student. I write today with deep concern for the future of higher education in our state—and with a personal stake in the decisions you are making. I’ve built my career in Ohio’s public university system, I am raising a student who will soon enter it, and I believe our collective future depends on preserving institutions that educate, support, and empower.

Ohio’s public colleges and universities play an essential role in advancing economic opportunity, civic leadership, and public service. Data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York shows that college graduates earn a median annual salary of \$65,000, compared to \$38,000 for high school graduates—a difference that translates into more than \$1 million in additional lifetime earnings. Every public dollar invested in higher education returns approximately \$5 in economic impact through tax revenue, reduced public expenditures, and job creation.

And yet, the current Senate budget proposal undermines this critical public good in three significant ways:

First, the Senate removed funding for campus-based mental health services that had been included in Governor DeWine’s executive budget. As an educator, I see the urgency of this need every day. These services are vital for student well-being, retention, and academic success. Cutting them now would be both harmful and short-sighted. I urge you to restore this funding.

Second, House Bill 96 includes provisions that sideline faculty input by reducing faculty senates to a merely advisory role on curricular matters and granting boards of trustees’ unilateral authority over academic programs and requirements. This language signals an alarming shift toward political control of curriculum and away from shared governance. Faculty are disciplinary experts, and curricular decisions should remain rooted in academic—not partisan—standards.

Third, the proposed expansion of Senate Bill 1 mandates to private colleges and universities is unnecessary and inappropriate. Requiring private institutions to comply with vague “intellectual diversity” directives imposes undue state interference and risks chilling academic freedom across Ohio’s higher education system.

In light of these concerns, I respectfully urge the committee to:

- **Restore funding for student mental health services as proposed in the Governor’s budget**
- **Reject the expansion of Senate Bill 1 mandates to private colleges and universities**
- **Protect academic freedom and preserve faculty governance over curriculum**
- **Increase investment in need-based aid and institutional capacity**

As an educator, a parent, and a voter, I want Ohio’s students—including my own child—to attend colleges and universities where learning is rigorous, inquiry is protected, and support systems are in place to help them thrive.

I urge you to uphold those values in the state budget.