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To Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee: thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of Substitute Senate Bill (SB) 126 on behalf of Ohio University.

Across the State of Ohio, lives are being affected because of hazing. By passing Sub. SB 126 you will be able to positively influence the health and wellness of all Ohioans, allow students and their families to make informed decisions about their involvement in organizations on college campuses, and potentially save lives. It is important now more than ever that hazing culture be eradicated. Ohio Senators Kunze and Gavarone have done an excellent job with the creation of this bill, and now it is time that we show our continued advocacy and support for the passing of Sub. SB 126.

I write this testimony representing Ohio University, the oldest college in the state, founded on February 18, 1804. Distinguished by its rich history, diverse campus, international community, and beautiful Appalachian setting. Ohio University is known as well for its outstanding faculty of accomplished teachers whose research and creative activity advance knowledge across many disciplines. Today, Ohio University is committed to providing a sense of community where all individuals in the university community are valued, their skills and knowledge cultivated, and their work supported. Our community is built on the values of civility, community, citizenship, character, and commitment.

I want to recognize for a moment the parents and families across this country who have lost loved ones to hazing. My deepest condolences go to the family and friends of Stone Foltz and the entire Bowling Green State University community. It was not very long ago that the Ohio University family experienced a similar loss. Collin Wiant, a freshman from Dublin Ohio, died on November 12, 2018, at the Sigma Pi, Epsilon chapter house, which was located off campus and not recognized by the university. I will never forget getting the call from our local police and will never forget my first conversation with the Wiant family. These are phone calls that should never happen to any family.

Since the death of Collin, Ohio University has worked tirelessly to address our campuses' culture surrounding hazing. Through the implementation of a Hazing Prevention Task Force, we have met with students, faculty, and staff to revise our hazing policy, offered new preventative measures and education to support all our student groups, and create a streamlined conduct website sharing the conduct history of student groups. Our committee continues to meet monthly to discuss next steps in bystander intervention and education for incoming students and families. While our university is committed to education and making changes, the work is much larger than us alone.

2020 was the first year in 60 years that there was not a death because of hazing across this country. As of March 2021, there have already been two confirmed hazing deaths. The pandemic only stopped this horrible culture temporarily.

According to Allen & Madden, 55% of college students involved in clubs, teams and organizations experience hazing (2008). As is the case with any form of power-based personal violence, any student has the potential to be a victim of hazing, yet only 5% of students report their incident. Through its hidden dynamics and deceptively slow build, hazing will continue to take more lives. By passing this bill, the state of Ohio and its colleges and universities will be one step closer to preventing senseless tragedies like those most recently experienced at Bowling Green State University and our very own Ohio University.

Through Sub. SB 126, colleges and universities would have a baseline for mandatory hazing education, something which is so critical to students and families seeking to join an athletic team or club, student organization, performance group, or sorority/fraternity. This education will provide students and their families with information about the school's hazing policies, rights and responsibilities as a new member, training around bystander intervention, and the resources available to them throughout their joining process. Additionally, Sub. SB 126 will mandate that colleges and universities share the conduct history of every team, student organization, sorority and fraternity, and performance group, thus providing students and their families with a transparent historical conduct record prior to affiliation.

It would be unacceptable, jeopardize lives and student wellness if those responsible for the tragic hazing deaths occurring on our campuses face nothing more than a fourth-degree misdemeanor charge. Conduct adjudication through our institutions is simply not enough.

The passing of Sub. SB 126 will not only help to create a culture change around hazing on our college and university campuses across the state of Ohio but will positively influence the health and wellness of all Ohioans. This bill could save lives. On behalf of students, faculty, staff, and alumni from Ohio University, I am urging you to take a stand against hazing and to pass Senate Bill 126.

Sincerely,



Jenny Hall-Jones, Ph.D.  
Interim Vice President for Student Affairs

References:

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<https://www.ohio.edu/admissions/about-ohio/history-traditions>