



**Todd A. Diacon**

*President*

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 135 on behalf of Kent State University and to recognize the State of Ohio's longstanding, and on-going commitment to higher education. I would also like to recognize Vice Chair Cirino, the bill's sponsor and senator representing our Kent and Geauga campuses, for his willingness to work with the higher education community to make changes to the proposed legislation which are reflected in the substitute bill.

My name is Todd Diacon and I am the 13<sup>th</sup> president of Kent State University, northeast Ohio's largest public university and the state's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest 4-year institution. We graduate nearly 10,000 students each year with many of these graduates finding their first jobs, in their field, right here in Ohio.

Let me start by telling you about the important role higher education can make in the trajectory of a family...my family:

The framed World War II naval uniform of my father hangs on the wall of our house. He joined the Navy in December 1941 at the ripe old age of 17. At that age he had never seen a dentist, and when he reported for duty the first thing the Navy did was pull half of his rotted teeth. His widowed mother was poor, and made ends meet by washing other peoples' clothes. My father was a shoeshine boy, and our family still has his shoeshine kit. They were the poorest of the poor in a poor place, the panhandle of Oklahoma, at the poorest of times, the Great Depression.

After initial service in North Africa and the invasion of Sicily, my father was then transferred to the Pacific theater where, as a landing craft pilot, he participated in several of the island invasions in Asia. At the age of 21 he was honorably discharged from the United States Navy. Supported by the GI Bill after the war, in six years he earned both his bachelors' degree and his advanced degree in medicine. I grew up making house calls with him as he served for nearly 50 years as a small-town general practitioner.

A college education transformed my father's life and our family. Every day I look at his uniform to remind me of what an honor it is to serve Ohioans as the President of Kent State University, so that I can make the transformative power of a college degree more attainable for new generations.

**Office of the President**

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I am a historian by training, and I am here to say that for much of its history, Ohio has gotten things right. Governor Rhodes' 1962 Blueprint for Brainpower promised to put higher education institutions within an easy drive of all Ohioans. As a result, Kent State's seven regional campuses stretch from Ashtabula to Tuscarawas, and they cover an area larger than the State of Connecticut.

The vision of Governor Rhodes, over time, created a state university system, that offers Ohio families and their children a wide range of educational options. While Senate Bill 135 does not directly account for Kent State's regional campuses, our seven regional campuses provide Ohioans with benefits including cost savings, convenient locations and a range of degree options from certificates and associates degrees, to bachelors and advanced degrees, with most at a 40% discount over our central campus.

As you consider provisions contained within the bill, including regional university partnerships, I ask that you consider the partnership between Kent State University at Stark, and Stark State College, which is co-located on our campus in North Canton, OH. Our Stark campus, which serves over 5000 students in the greater Canton region, has a long-standing relationship with Stark State that is based on academic partnerships and shared services.

While Kent State's Stark campus offers core curriculum and all levels of undergraduate courses, Stark State students regularly, and seamlessly, transition from the community college to our university. In fact, through an agreement between our two schools, students enrolled at either school can take one class per semester at the other school, without any additional charge. Our admissions counselors actively and cooperatively recruit Stark State students who have chosen to pursue the first two years of their degree at a community college and wish to continue their educational pursuit of a bachelor's degree at Kent State.

Partnerships like this expand beyond our co-located campus to our other campuses, where we have long standing 2+2 agreements with community colleges in the region and we actively advise and recruit in partnership with the 2-year institutions to provide cost effective and convenient pathways to a college degree.

This effort was further solidified through a series of regional compacts between universities and community colleges, supported by provisions in the Ohio Revised Code, that improve efficiency and effectiveness, avoid duplicative programs, strengthen educational offerings, provide collaborative access to degrees and support the region's workforce needs.

In consideration of agreements already in place, I suggest a reconsideration of the proposal to allow bachelor's degrees to be offered at community colleges and for the approval of nursing bachelor's degree programs. The ability already exists for bachelor's degrees to be offered by community colleges, provided they are not duplicative of programs currently offered in the area. Additionally, due to the declining number of college-aged students in Ohio, our university system currently has excess capacity in many of these program areas.

With regards to the approval of nursing programs, expanding the Bachelor of Science degree in nursing to community colleges will result in increased costs for the state, and ultimately students, as community colleges work to set-up programs, hire qualified staff and seek program accreditation. There is already a shortage of qualified faculty to teach these courses and even in Northeast Ohio, with its abundance of health care institutions, there are limits to the number of clinical sites that are available. Expanding nursing programs will only exacerbate these challenges.

Students and the state would be better served by expanding on existing articulation agreements between community colleges and universities that currently offer the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN). If being place bound is of concern, Kent State (as well as other institutions) offers a 100% on-line RN to BSN program that can be completed in as little as one year, which is a cost savings to students. It should also be noted that we have seen hospitals in Northeast Ohio cover the costs of these program for their employees, effectively eliminating the cost of acquiring a bachelor's degree for the student. Having a BSN degree opens a wider range of employment and career advancement opportunities for the student, which in turn is beneficial to the state.

With regards to the state's funding support of higher education, I thank the General Assembly for the work it has done to incentivize universities to support student success through course completion and graduation. Ohio is continuing to get things right when it comes to higher education. In 2014, your predecessors adjusted the state's funding formula to be a 100% "Performance Based" reimbursement model.

Now, Kent State and the other public universities earn reimbursement only when students pass courses and when they graduate. And this is how it should be. We should earn our keep, so to speak, and we are earning our keep, in fact. We applaud the removal of the Second Chance Voucher Program from this bill, which runs counter to the Performance Based model, just as its benefits are becoming evident in completion and graduation data at Kent State and other Ohio universities. That said, I will be very interested to see the results of the voucher pilot program that the substitute bill creates, as it may glean some insight into ways we as a state can keep students from falling through the cracks and ensure graduations.

At Kent State, ten years ago, the graduation rate for the Kent campus was 49%. Today it is 66%, and as such, Kent now has a higher graduation rate than the flagship universities in a dozen states. Indeed, in 2020 the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities named Kent State as one of four finalists for its Degree Completion award. We have engineered this graduation success, while we have made our university even more accessible.

More than one-third of students on our Kent campus are the first in their families to attend college, and that figure rises to nearly 60% of incoming students on our regional campuses. Kent State University now graduates close to 10,000 students a year, in programs ranging from associates degrees to doctorates. 10,000 graduates a year. At Kent State we understand what it means to respond to education, workforce, and employer needs.

We also understand the importance of working with members of this body to ensure that we are meeting your needs and expectations for our students and their families and for higher education in the state of Ohio. We greatly appreciate the time that members have provided Kent State University to discuss and consider the many items contained within this legislative proposal. We will continue to work with members to find solutions that solidify our state's leadership in higher education.

In conclusion, thank you for supporting the transformative power of higher education in Ohio. Thank you for helping us guarantee access to higher education not just for the fortunate few, but for the meritorious many. As I say loudly and often: the challenge of student debt is exceeded only by the tragedy of taking on student debt and not earning a degree. Access to a community college or four-year university is important, but today that is not even half the battle. TODAY the coin of the realm is degree completion. Debt with a college degree is an investment, and studies show that college graduates will earn \$1 million more over their working lifetimes than those without degrees. Access without earning a degree, on the other hand, is a failure on our part.

Who is this generation's Second-Class Petty Officer James Louis Diacon? Whose life will service to our country and higher education transform? In Ohio, we know what to do and how to do it. We have our Blueprint for Brainpower.

Chairman Johnson and members of the committee, I thank you for your time and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.