TESTIMONY OF RICHARD K. VEDDER

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

OHIO STATEHOUSE ROOM 115

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Chairman Duffey and members of the committee:

My name is Richard Vedder, and my title is Distinguished Professor of Economics Emeritus at Ohio University, where I am in my 53rd year of teaching, currently having over 40 undergraduates in class. My remarks represent my own views, not those of Ohio University. I am here in support of H.B.66, the newly introduced substitute bill, not the earlier bill explicitly dealing with tenure, which in my judgment was flawed.

As Elizabeth Taylor told her fifth husband, “I’ll be brief.” Ohio state government directly spent $2.295 billion on higher education in fiscal year 2017, $200 for every resident in the Buckeye State. My guess is if voters were asked why we tax them to subsidize universities, most would say it is to provide low cost schooling to young Ohioans. In other words, they probably believe the money primarily enhances undergraduate education. This bill supports that public perception.

Many state-supported professors conscientiously work hard to impart knowledge and even some wisdom to undergraduates. But university incentive systems work to encourage professors to emphasize *research*. This is not peculiar to Ohio, and reflects national academic labor markets. A superb researcher will often get big raises, lots of job offers, and low teaching obligations. A superb teacher probably will typically make less and have a lesser national reputation. While good research can enhance teaching as well, sometimes there are perceived pressures for faculty to ignore undergraduate teaching, and to spend relatively little time on such related tasks as advising students on how to traverse the sometime rocky road between adolescence and adulthood.

Sometimes, recognizing this, states come up with simplistic, one-size-fits-all solutions, laws where the cure is worse than the disease. I recall once in the mid-1990s, Ohio passed a law saying the teaching load of professors shall increase 10 percent. No one knew what that meant –do we give tests with 11 short essay questions rather than 10? Do we teach in 55 minute segments instead of 50? My university therefore did absolutely nothing. When asked at a hearing how I was meeting the requirement to teach 10 percent more, I told the legislators “I just talk 10 percent faster in class than I used to.” I had tenure, you folks had term limits, so nothing happened.

There are other problems regarding mandating greater attention to undergraduate learning making it difficult to write effective legislation. For example, what about classes, such as the one I am now teaching in the economic history of the United States, where I have *both* undergraduate and graduate students –is that an undergraduate or a graduate class? What, in order to evade legislative mandates on faculty, more undergraduate teaching is turned over to relatively inexperienced and less knowledgeable graduate students or part-time adjuncts? What is the impact of the growing amount of on-line instruction on undergraduate student outcomes? Do you measure classroom effectiveness by student knowledge of the material taught, by their success later in life, or by some other criteria? There is some striking national evidence suggesting students gain little in key areas, such as critical learning skills and even basic civic knowledge during the college years. Shouldn’t we be concerned about that?

Thus mandating more attention to undergraduate teaching, even if a good idea, is very tricky business. House Bill 66 deals with that by proposing a commission of largely university personnel to come up with ideas on nudging universities to give full attention to undergraduate learning in ways that are effective, not excessively costly, nor intrusive on the ability of institutions to innovate and try new approaches to disseminating knowledge, ideas, and creative endeavors.

Regarding higher education commissions, the most important recent one was the Spellings Commission, named after a former U.S. Secretary of Education who is now President of the University of North Carolina. I was a member of that commission, and its 2006 recommendations did help fashion the debate on how to reshape our universities. Commissions are relatively inexpensive, allowing for potential laws to be shaped *after* citizen input rather than before.

Care should be taken so that any commission is not perceived as fiercely partisan. The issues are not Republican or Democratic, but relate to good governance and use of public funds. The Spellings Commission worked pretty well because it had Republicans as well as Democrats and independents serving. Credibility would be enhanced if *non-politicians* served as members, that is to say that appointees by the Speaker or the Senate President be citizens who are not holders of public office.

Good luck in your endeavors; I would be glad to answer questions. Thank you.